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THE WHISTLER**

by WM. R. COX

TWO NOVELETTES

● **TOO TOUGH
TO TAKE**

by JOHN JO
CARPENTER

● **THE CORPSE RIDES
AT DAWN**

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... AND THEN DAN SAVED THE DAY



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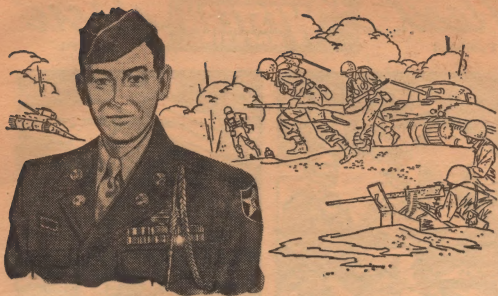
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**U. S. Army and
U. S. Air Force**

Next

Published

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issue

April 9th



Old Devil Lance Hassett, boot-tough army scout, heard the dying words of his friend John Larsen—that an Indian raid had wiped out Fort Cannon Ball and killed Larsen's wife. Then Lance Hassett was begged to find Larsen's daughter and take her from the hell-hole of Fighting Bluffs.



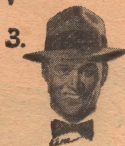
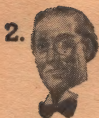
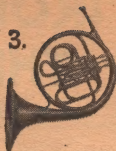
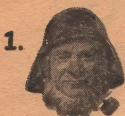
When Larsen died, Lance Hassett hid Larsen's gold in the river bottom. Then Lance rode to Fighting Bluffs. There, at the garish Diamond Palace, Old Devil Lance told Nancy Larsen the tough news of her parents being killed. They were interrupted by Brace Bend, snake-mean town boss of the Bluffs.



Lance Hassett figured Brace Bend to be the yellow-dog renegade behind that Indian raid on Fort Cannon Ball—and Lance told him: "Go ahead an' call yore gun-dogs, or shoot me . . . if yuh can. When you fail, I'll slit yore belly an' shove yore liver in yore face!"



Following Satan's signposts, Lance found himself in a smugglers' underground kingdom. . . . Barefooted, bare-chested, tortured, Old Devil Lance got his hands on a passel of six-shooters and shotguns. . . . The complete story of bloody frontier adventure will be told by Tom Roan in his novel—"Death for Old Devil Lance!"



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IRON BARS FOR THE WHISTLER

By WILLIAM R. COX



CHAPTER

Drygulch Victim

1

Willy Wooten, the Whistler Kid, drank sarsaparilla in Red Morgan's Knave of Spades Bar and pondered. He was a very young man, with a bland, innocent cast of countenance, dressed in close-fitting doeskin trousers, impeccable hand-stitched boots and a checkered shirt. The two black guns sagging at his hips seemed too great a load to bear.

Marshal Dick Bland, handsome law officer of Silver, said, "Things are popping since Mortimer Bodley came to town. That man is a great promoter."

"Seems so," said Willy. He was whistling under his breath while he thought about it.

"He spends money like water. Put ten thousand on deposit in Mr. Carey's bank and says there is plenty more where that came from. If he buys Glory Mine he'll speed up production and Silver will benefit."

*Smashing Novel of the
Tough Mining Country*

Men poured out of Bodley's
stronghold. . .



Sanctimonious Mortimer Bodley took
in Silver with his grandiose mining
talk—but not the Whistler Kid . . . who
vowed he'd send that pious Satan
back to his own hometown!

"Mebbe you're right," conceded Willy. "No maybes about it," said Bland. "It's time Silver grew a little. This could be a big town. There is copper, silver, cattle, even farming."

Willy said, "You right, Dick." There were also thieves, cut-throats, gamblers and rustlers, plus Apaches. But neither peace officer thought of these as other than minor irritants, part of their job. Willy was working for the Cattlemen's Association and things had been quiet for awhile.

There was a commotion in the street. The doors of the Knave of Spades swung wide. Mr. Carey, of the Silver Bank, and several other men of the town came briskly in. It seemed to Willy that they all clustered about the big stranger like puppies around a St. Bernard.

Mortimer Bodley was six feet six inches tall. He wore a high-crowned white Stetson which made him appear to tower to seven feet. He had a round, smooth, florid face, with skin like a baby's, and wide-spaced brown eyes flecked with gold; strange eyes which seemed to peer through things, to see more than the eyes of an ordinary mortal.

He was attired in a black suit of conventional cut, but his waistcoat was a flowered triumph. He had a hawk nose and when he removed his hat, his fair, scant hair was long and brushed straight back from his high-domed brow.

Mortimer Bodley drawled, "Yaas. . . Step up and have a smile, gents. . . Everybody have a smile on ole Mort Bodley. Here 'tis almost evenin' and we ain't had a drink since eleven this mawnin'. Business is a fine thing, but it sho does inte'fere with m' drinkin'."

The businessmen laughed politely. They drank, although some of them did not take a pint of whiskey in a year. Bodley had a way of carrying them with him, on the tide of his vast humors. He was a smarter man than any of them, and they knew it.

Bodley stood against the bar and winked down at Willy. He said, "Take a sass, Whistler. You got the right idee—shun the demon rum." He tossed off a good three fingers of rye. "Here's lookin' at yo', Whistler."

He was particularly affable to Willy. He never addressed Willy as "button," he

never directed a curious, disbelieving glance at the slight youth's two incongruous big guns.

Willy said, "Your health, Mr. Bodley. Did you buy Glory today?"

"Can't get 'em to make a deal. Bought a lil ole hole next to it, though."

"Apache Diggin's?" Willy sipped his cold bottle of pop. "That's worked out years ago."

Bodley leaned closer, his strange eyes filled with humor. "Know that, Whistler. But I got it cheap. And it proves I mean business, see? Show 'em the color of my money. You got to light fires under these fellers."

Willy said, "Sure. You kin light a fire to Apache Diggin's, too, Mr. Bodley, and you won't lose a thing."

The big stranger poured another drink. He said slowly, "Yuh know, Whistler, I went down in Apache today. They drilled three ways, but the fourth was never touched. I'm sendin' a crew in there to try that fourth way. Made a lot of money in m' time, Whistler, doin' the things other men sorta neglected."

Bodley's smile took in the entire bar. "Fill 'em up," he directed Blacky, the bartender. "Let the welkin ring, let's us be merry. Aim to make Silver the biggest city in the Territory. Aim t'—"

Willy slipped away and out the door. He had heard Bodley before. The trouble was, Dick Bland and all of them believed in the big man. Willy unhitched his bay pony from the rack and slid into a saddle. He pointed the cayuse's nose toward the mountain and let him take his own pace.

Foster Deal, head of the Association, had also listened to the spell-binder. The entire town of Silver had capitulated to ten thousand dollars in Mr. Carey's bank and the imposing facade of the stranger. Yet to Willy Wooten, hard-bitten son of a cactus-tough father, Mortimer Bodley was as phony as fool's gold.

WILLY rode past Hogan's Bar and noted two horses, head down at the rack. He reined in the bay, frowning. He dismounted, slid to the door of the saloon. He saw the two hats of the riders and shoved inside.

Hogan, a surly man, said, "I ain't got no sass'prilla."

Willy ignored the barkeeper. He said, "Hiya, boys."

The men at the bar stood immobile. Their hands were at their belts. One was tall and lean and slightly stooped, with a scarred, ugly face. His name was Patch Dailey. The other was short and fair and cheerful. He was Delta Horton, from Louisiana.

Horton said, "Well if it ain't m' old friend, Willy the Whistler. Hiya, Whistler? How's ketchin' rustlers?"

"Slow-like," drawled Willy. "How's stealin' hosses?"

Patch Dailey's thumb jerked, but he did not turn his head.

Horton chuckled amusedly. "Slow-like. Too many nosey damn lawmen in this heah country."

Willy said, "You boys livin' hereabouts?"

Patch Dailey came around, then. "None of yore cussed business, yuh sneakin' little—"

Horton's elbow dug viciously into Dailey's lean ribs. He said, "We ain't t' mind our own business, Whistler."

Willy pursed his lips. A tuneless whistling sounded on the fetid air of the saloon. The two hard-bitten men at the bar waited. Dailey was breathing hard, but he said no more.

Finally Willy shrugged. "I'll pass, for now. Be seein' you boys." He nodded and went out.

Riding up the mountain trail, he had to turn aside twice for ore wagons, coming down from Glory Mine. The eastern syndicate which owned Glory was spending money and getting out the silver.

Willy thought about Patch Dailey and Horton. There was nothing he could do—but they two were the worst cattle thieves and bandits in the Territory, he well knew. They were particularly annoying because he had never caught them dead to rights. He had nailed some of their men, but Horton was always smart enough, and Dailey deadly enough, to cover their precious tracks.

He dismounted outside the office of Glory and a blond youth limped out, smiling a greeting.

Willy said, "Hiya, Bud. Long time no see."

"You been sparkin' Pru Croy," said

Bud Lott. He was an engaging young man who had once walked with bandit Jack Ketch. He had reformed and now worked for Glory Mine. One leg was permanently injured by a bullet wound, but otherwise he was well set-up.

Willy said, "I'd admire to have more time to do same. Bud, how 'bout Apache Diggins'?"

Accustomed to his friend's abrupt approach to a subject, Bud batted his eyes and said, "Just a hole in the ground."

"You got time t' take a look-see?"

Bud nodded and went back inside the frame office. Willy surveyed the busy scene. Glory was certainly pumping out the ore. If Mortimer Bodley had the backing to swing a deal and buy this mine, he indeed was a big dealer and Willy was all wrong.

Bud returned and the two walked southward. The trail between Glory and the old diggings was rough and narrow. There was another, broad approach from below, but there was no connecting road. Willy hated walking, especially on rock, and it was a hot afternoon, but he plodded along in Bud's wake, obsessed with his ideas.

Just as they came to a high promontory known as Indian Leap, a rifle shot spanged clear and sharp on the bright air.

Willy dove for a round boulder. Bud took cover behind a pile of loose shale. The rifle crackled carefully, the shots spaced. Another, heavier bore gun took up the refrain. It rained death for moments.

Then, as suddenly as it had started, the barrage ceased. Willy called cautiously, "You all right, Bud?"

"Except for bein' scared half to death. It's hell when you don't tote hardware, you know it, Willy?"

"Nope," said Willy. "I allus tote it. 'Ceptin' I should've brought my rifle."

Bud said, "You can't hit nothin' with it, nowhow. But it would be a comfort."

"Those jokers are gone," said Willy flatly. "I'm goin' down to the mine."

"You must be plumb crazy. . . ."

"Folks don't lay down such a lotta fire if they mean to stick around and smoke yuh out," said Willy. "You know that."

"Mebbe it's because I ain't packin' my equalizer," sighed Bud. "But I don't foller you, Willy."

Willy slid on his boot heels, coming around the rock. He worked his way, sprinting at intervals, to the edge of Indian Leap. He removed his battered hat and projected his neck until he could see below. He took a long, careful look about him.

The Apache Diggings lay directly south of the Leap. Brush had grown around the shaft, which was located on a rocky hill. Below the hill lay a valley green with pinons. Halfway down the hill was a wide ledge.

On the ledge a man lay, spread-eagled in the sun, hatless, motionless. The man was dead.

Willy got up, showing himself plainly, and called to Bud, "Come on down. We got us a corpse. I knowed them jaspers was coverin' up a getaway."

CHAPTER

Willy's Rebel Cry

2 The body was of a roughly-dressed man in middle years. He was bald, and his face was marred by the two bullets which had struck him. One had gone through his left eye, the other neatly into his temple. Willy had never seen the man before, nor had Bud. He wore miner's shoes and was obviously not a cattleman.

Willy said, "Looks like those two jaspers was committin' a nice murder when we sky-lined ourselves like two boobies, so the two jaspers banged away at us an' then high-tailed. And on this rock yuh cain't track nobody."

Bud said, "It was murder, all right. This poor joker hasn't got even a revolver."

"Revolvers is good enough," said Willy severely. "He's got a Bowie in his boot. Looks like a furriner, don't he?" He handled the Bowie delicately, balancing the long sharp blade.

Bud said, "He looks dead and we better pack him to town."

"Yeah," nodded Willy. "You do that." He put the Bowie in his belt. "Get a couple men, take him down to Bullock's an' put him on a table in the back room. Light some candles—it's goin' to be dark in there. . . ."

"Hey," protested Bud, "I got work to do. I'm workin' for Glory."

"I'll fix that with Bull Slavin," said Willy. "I got me an idee."

He led the way back to the mine and talked to the superintendent, the heavy-necked, red-faced Bull Slavin. Bull agreed with him and Willy rode the bay pony back down the mountain. He turned at the base of the rocky road and went back up toward Apache Diggings.

He examined the spot where the shots had been fired. He found nothing but one exploded brass shell—a .44 Winchester, as anonymous as a piece of shale in that country.

He remounted the bay and went down to Silver. It was past eight, but there was a light in the kitchen of the scrubbed, neat cottage of Miz Croy. He knocked and the lean, still handsome mother of his girl unbarred the door.

She said, "Lands sakes, I thought the rustlers were quiet nowadays. You hungry, Willy Wooten?"

"Yes'm," he said. He put his hat on the floor and Pru smiled at him, the way she did, and he gulped despite himself. He never got used to that understanding, deep smile which bathed him in affection. He had been alone so long, battered and beaten by life, that he was scarcely able to absorb the fact that this flaxen-haired, blue-eyed girl really cared for him.

He said, "Howdy, Pru. Been up on Glory. There was some trouble."

"Naturally. When you're late for dinner, there is always trouble," said Pru.

Miz Croy said, "You're more like your father ev'ry day, I declare." She was putting food on the table with dexterity and swiftness.

Willy told them everything. He ended, "This Mortimer Bodley's got the town by the ears."

"A handsome man," said Miz Croy. "Well dressed, too. Saw him in the store. He was buyin' candy for some pore lil Mexican kids. A man like that, with money in the bank—he's all right, Willy Wooten."

"Huh?" Willy stared at the usually perceptive Miz Croy.

"A fine influence. He is goin' to attend the social this Friday. Promised us aid for the new hall we aim to add to the church." Miz Croy's cheeks were pink, but her tone was firm.

Over the shoulder of the woman he saw her daughter, one blue eye closed, her head shaking negatively at Willy. He swallowed coffee and warm biscuit.

Pru said, "Well, he only bought the mine today. And you don't think Dailey and Horton got up there that quick. So maybe it was only a feud among foreign miners."

"Sure," said Willy hastily. He picked up his hat. "Got to go down to Bullock's and see Bud."

"You'll be busy now," said Pru with understanding. "I've got plenty sewing to do."

"Sashayin' around with Red Morgan and his crew," sniffed Miz Croy. "I declare, Willy Wooten, I wish you'd buy a new hat onct in awhile. You do look shabby, sometimes."

"Yes'm," said Willy meekly. "Meant to git me one today. . . ." He wanted to kiss Pru, but Miz Croy's sharp eyes forbade such pleasure. He went out and took the bay pony down and stabled him at the hotel, then walked across to Bullock's undertaking and carpentry shop, which was also the post office.

Bud was sitting with the corpse, feet coked on the cooling table. There was ice under the board on which the body was stretched. The man had no identifying scars except those which had given him death. Bullock had fixed him up right nice.

Willy said, "How 'bout goin' in the other room, there you won't be seen, and watchin'? I'm sendin' people in to see if anybody knows this jasper. I'd admire to see if you could spot a faker."

Bud complained, "I don't like this type of work. There's no action." But he got up and limped into the darkened back room.

Bud was the best man in a tight Willy had ever known. All of Jack Ketch's men had been tough, but Bud was the quickest and smartest of them—and the only one left alive.

IN RED MORGAN'S Knave of Spades there was a big poker game. Even Mr. Carey was playing, and of course Mortimer Bodley dominated the scene. The big promoter's voice boomed as Willy entered:

"Lemme see now, y'all are sure sharp

at this heah game. . . . I'll bet ten dollahs, gents."

His accent, Willy thought, was also phony. His voice twanged when it should have slurred. Willy wondered where he had heard a genuine soft southern accent—and then remembered that it was Delta Horton, in Hogan's.

He stood at the end of the bar and drank a sass. Bodley groaned in great good nature. "Mr. Carey, that beats me. Cain't do a thing with y'all. I swear, gentlemen. Cain't win for losin'!"

Willy said, "How much is he loser?"

"He's 'bout even," said Red. The one-legged owner of the bar could always tell you who was ahead or behind and how much. He had a mathematical mind and a passion for watching poker, although he never played. He cocked an eye at Willy. "You cur'ous about that hombre, too?"

Willy said, "Found a corpse this afternoon, Red. Up on Apache Diggin's. Stranger. Looks like one of them fur-riners."

Red said, "On Apache, huh? Bodley bought it—there's a killin'."

Willy said, "Everybody else loves this Bodley."

"Uh-huh," said Red. "I been around. I been to Geo'gia, I been to Car'lina. I been to Texas. I even been t' England, Germany, Italy and New Yawk. Seen lotsa fellers. Seen 'em spend money. Yuh know what I think?"

Willy said, "No, but I bet it's a beaut."

"Think this Bodley's short o' cash."

"Cash? Why he's got ten thousand in the bank."

"Uh-huh," nodded Red. "But dast he draw some of it? What would all these jolly merchants think if he hadda draw? He ain't bought for the house tonight—and he ain't aimin' t' lose in thet poker game."

Willy said, "How do you know he ain't?"

"I been to New Orleans, too," said Red. "I seen gamblers."

Willy said, "When Dick Bland comes in, get him to have everybody here go down and try to recognize this corpse we found, will yuh, Red? Look better comin' from the marshal."

He drifted over and watched the poker game from Red's high stool. Mortimer

Bodley was dealing. Willy's eyes were the sharpest in the Territory, and he fastened them on Bodley's hands.

Mr. Carey opened for ten dollars. They all played, and Bodley said in his hearty way, "Gents, now I got you in, I'll jest raise." The man's strange eyes were cold and still, although his mouth smiled. He dealt himself a card.

Everyone played through a ten-dollar raise. They drew cards. Mr. Carey, a wizened little man who normally lived in mortal fear of Mrs. Carey, boldly bet on his one-card buy.

Two men called, the others dropped. Mortimer Bodley relaxed, his eyes were smiling again. He said, "Raise fifty."

Mr. Carey gulped. He hesitated, grinding his pasteboards together. Then he said, "I'll jest try it one time more." He put in a hundred dollars.

"And fifty, suh," said Bodley. "Y'all been trimmin' me. This heah looks like the ole man's chance to git even."

The banker shook his head. "I call. You're due. I got aces up."

"Yessuh. Yessuh," boomed Bodley. "Just read 'em, Carey. Three little deuces!" He seemed happy and innocent as a child. He roared, "C'mon, Red, Drinks for the house!"

Willy crept down off the stool. He had seen enough. He couldn't swear to it, for Bodley was very swift with those white, firm hands. But there had been something funny about the way the big man had dealt himself that single card he drew to a pair of deuces. If he had not known what was in Mr. Carey's hand and in the other hands, he had taken an awful chance, only helping himself to one deuce. Red Morgan had been right.

Outdoors there were stars, hanging in the sky as though set out by a lamplighter with the ague. They twinkled down at Willy, but he had things on his mind.

A Glory Mine wagon went by. The driver waved his whip at the vague figure of a man across the street. Willy melted into a shadow near Hamilton's smithy and waited, but the wagon went on down toward the stamp mill south of Silver.

They had moved the stamp mill down from the mountain after trouble with machinery which had hampered the former owners. The truckers had profits

thereby, but the syndicate seemed satisfied. The ore was smelted, the silver extracted, and then the silver ingots were trucked down to the nearest railroad, which was fifty miles south.

Armed guards rode with the ingots. The Apaches were always off the reservations, raising Cain, and bandits abounded, but the guards had never lost a wagonload. They were picked men, good shots, and there were always a half dozen of them.

Willy worked his way, remaining as invisible as possible, toward Hogan's. He had a great curiosity about Dailey and Horton. There was always trouble with such gents.

He lounged in the shadows, patient as an Indian, for an hour. There was no sign of the two bandits. Down the street men drifted into Bullock's in twos and threes, never singly, came out again. Dick Bland was sending in the citizens to identify the dead man.

Willy sighed. Dailey and Horton were probably holed up. It was no use hanging around, wasting time. He started for the hotel, where the Association provided a big, airy room for him. He had made a dozen strides when from out of the darkness a voice said, "Yaas: . . Whistler. Just a minute, eh?"

Mortimer Bodley was leaning against the barber shop door, in the blackest shadow. A match flared and he lit a small cigar. One corner of his mouth was lifted in a half smile. Willy stopped dead, thumbs in belt.

Bodley said, "Lookin' for someone, ain't yuh?"

"There's a couple hoss thieves in town," said Willy sociably.

"Do tell. Hoss thieves, eh? Thought you was a cattle detective."

Willy shrugged and waited. He knew Mortimer Bodley was not the type of man to waylay him for conversational purposes alone.

Bodley said suddenly, "Want a job that pays plenty, Whistler?"

"Need some money," said Willy. "I want to get married."

"Ha," said Bodley. "Well, now, could make it a weddin' present, sorta. Whistler—this killin' at Apache Diggins—jest heard about it. Goin' to need a man. Run the diggin's, mebbe run off thieves an'

killers. Got the money, and aim to pay. Say—two hundred a month?"

Willy said gravely, "I'll think it over."

"Better had," said Bodley. His voice was dry. "It's better t' work fo' me, Whistler."

"Yeah," said Willy. "Reckon 'tis, Mr. Bodley. But if I don't work fo' you—it's goin' to be hell, you worryin' 'bout me workin' agin yuh, ain't?" He walked slowly away toward the hotel. The cigar winked furiously in the doorway to the barber shop.

CHAPTER**3**

Apache Raid

Three men came in on the stage the next morning. They were huge, burly men, and they carried bundles and small miners' kit. All were tough; all were half drunk an hour after arrival. All asked repeatedly for Mortimer Bodley.

The great man came from a late breakfast shaved and scrubbed and pink. He garnered the miners at the Knave of Spades and made them a speech about the slow progress of his plans, but tossed them the Apache Diggins for the interim.

Then Bodley hired a wagon and went up with his miners to his property. Old timers smiled indulgently at this folly of Bodley's, and audibly hoped he could really get the eastern syndicate to let him buy heavily into Glory. He was a humdinger, all right, they said, a real sharp character.

Willy went down to Bullock's. Bud had slept in the hotel, but had not waked Willy, so there was no hot news, Willy knew.

In the back room, Bud said, "I'm sick o' this. There ain't but one man came in here showed any sign of knowin' that jasper. He come in this mornin', quick-like. Bland never thought of askin' him to try it."

Willy said, "Bodley."

"Sure," nodded Bud. "He thought he was alone. He walked close to the corpse, stared hard with them funny eyes of his. Then he looked over his shoulder, like he was scared, jest for a second. Then he lit a shuck outa here. Told Bullock to bury the poor feller—at Bodley's expense. Now if we knew who he was—"

Willy said, "He's a stranger, he was at Apache Diggins—he got shot. But how we goin' to learn whether Horton an' Dailey left town an' went up there?"

"Them two?" Bud stretched. "I'll learn that." He went out the back way and wandered toward Hogan's saloon, greatly relieved at escaping Bullock's.

Willy sat in the back room of the undertaking establishment for a moment. He took out the Bowie and examined it. The dead man had carried a sharp knife—but the lack of a gun interested Willy. Practically no one, not even a miner, would wander about in hill country without a gun.

Therefore, Willy reasoned, the foreign-looking dead man was a stranger not only to Silver, but to the western country. Yet Bodley had recognized him.

One of the things Willy had learned in his turbulent young life was never to underestimate a man. He was beginning to feel a healthy respect for Mortimer Bodley.

His attempt to hire Willy, for instance—that would have been a shrewd move if Willy had been merely a fast-shooting young range detective with a yen for excitement and fast money. As it was, it hadn't been smart, but it was the only mistake Bodley had made—except his fast dealing in the card game. But Bodley had no idea that Willy was onto his card sharpening.

Willy put the Bowie back in his boot. Scratches on the smooth handle tickled his fingertips, and he drew it out again. Taking it to the window, he stared at it in the sunlight.

There were faint tracings. He made out the letters "P" and "Z." They could be initials, he thought. "P.Z." Not many men had a name beginning with "Z." He began to feel, deep within him, the excitement of the chase. A surname beginning with "Z" could be plenty foreign enough.

But how had the strange man gotten up to Apache Diggings and what was he doing there? Willy's lips pursed; he began to whistle. He made up silent verses which did not rhyme, attuning them to the whistling. He sat for an hour in Bullock's back room, staring through the door at the bald-headed dead man.

HE SADDLED the bay pony at the hotel and rode down past Hogan's. He saw Bud in conversation with the bar-keeper. Hogan was talking loud, so Bud had managed to get him drunk. Willy waited in the shade of a cottonwood and in a moment or two Bud came out. He had been drinking enough to be merry, but he was a young man who could drink whiskey.

Bud went to the rack and got his own horse. Willy rode on the Glory Mine trail and in a little while Bud caught him.

Bud said, laughing, "It was a cinch. They left on yore heels yesterday. They was gone all afternoon, then come back in and likkered up. They slept in Hogan's back room, drunk. This mornin' they took off."

Willy said, "Then they did it. But why? They robbed him, sure, but that ain't their play, usually."

Bud said, "The thing is—what were they doin' up at Apache?"

"They tie in with Bodley," said Willy positively. "Horton an' Dailey wouldn't hang around Silver on their own. They're too well known here."

Bud said slowly, "I dunno. You're puttin' everything on Bodley pretty heavy, partner."

"Uh-huh," said Willy. "He's a great feller." He did not say any more.

The two young men rode up to Glory Mine. Bud had plenty of back work to catch up. Willy hung around until mid-afternoon, then rode back down the trail and turned up toward Apache Diggings.

At the edge of the property a man stepped out of the brush. He was one of the three miners and he carried a rifle. He said in an ugly voice, "This here's private propety."

There was no sign of Bodley or the other two miners, but the wagon was near the mine entrance. Willy slid down from the bay pony. He was about half the size of the burly guard.

He said, "Like t' see Mr. Bodley."

"He wouldn't like t' see you," said the miner. He thrust the rifle muzzle suddenly into Willy's ribs. "No two-gun squirt is gonna come up here an'—"

Willy's left hand brushed the muzzle of the rifle aside as easily as flicking flies. His right hand made a magical move, and

there was a big, black Colt in his fist. The revolver described a glittering arc. The barrel slammed hard against the big man's skull.

The miner grunted once as he fell. Willy picked up the rifle and trailed it toward the entrance to the shaft. He called, "Mr. Bodley. Could yuh come up here a minute?"

There was silence, then a scraping of boots on stone. A heavy voice muttered, "What's a matter with 'at Luke? Tole him not to let no one—"

"Shut up," said Mortimer Bodley.

The three men came out of the shaft. Willy handed the rifle to Bodley.

He said, "Feller got fresh with me out yonder. Sorta had to quiet him. . . I couldn't work for you, Mr. Bodley. I don't like fellers like that. I'm jest a simple cowman."

Bodley stared at the prone miner. The other two miners started forward, their faces suffused with anger. Bodley put out one hand and stopped them. He said, "You sure are a mite rough, Whistler. Is he daid?"

"Not if his head is hard," said Willy cheerfully. "I wanted to ask yuh, Mr. Bodley. Who was that other feller got his up here? The furrin feller. You know him?"

"Neveh saw the poor man in mah life," said Bodley. His southern accent became very thick. "Seein' as he was killed on mah propety, I want him buried right, howevah. Left word to thet effect."

The heavy-voiced miner broke forth irately, "The hell with this palaver. You gonna let this button git away with killin' Luke?"

At this moment Luke groaned and sat up. He put his hand to his head and it came away bloody. He spied Willy and shrank, scrambling on the ground, circling to get behind his mates. He stammered, "I had the gun right on him. He does tricks. He's the devil's own imp!"

"Hmmm," said Bodley. "Well, Whistler, I'm sorry you won't consider my offer. Yaas. . . very sorry. We are very busy here now. We—er—that is, I'll buy you a drink in Morgan's. Later, perhaps, suh?" He was extremely polite, but the strange lights in his large eyes were playing.

Willy said, "I see whatcha mean, Mr. Bodley. Okay." He eeled into the saddle of the bay. He went down the trail without a backward look.

When he had reached the bottom of the mountain, however, he did not ride toward town. He circled. He came back to Glory Mine, but did not show himself to anyone there. He knew a trail down near the gorge which led to Indian Leap. He left the bay at the base of the promontory where he and Bud had almost been shot and climbed up afoot. He settled down behind a boulder and called upon his Indian patience again.

He watched Apache Diggings all afternoon. Bodley came out of the mine every so often and smoked, then went back in. The two miners were working at something, all right. Luke had gone back to guard the trail.

It was dark before Bodley got back on the wagon and drove off. The shack which had once housed the original owners of the Diggings was in sorry shape, but the miners started a fire and were cooking when Willy went back to the happily grazing bay and mounted.

He did not go to Croy's for dinner, but sent a boy with a message that he would eat at the hotel. Somehow he did not want to hear any more about the glory of Mortimer Bodley from the lips of Miz Croy. He could not for the life of him understand how that level-headed woman could fall for the flashy promoter. He would never understand that Bodley treated women as women, using his big, round eyes, his smiling lips, the flattery of his soft southern speech, and that women loved it.

He was worrying through a tough hotel steak when Dick Bland came in and sat opposite him.

The marshal said, "Willy, I just talked to Bodley. He said you had a ruckus up at his mine."

"Nothin' much to it," said Willy.

"Bodley sent a telegram asking for a dozen more miners. I think he has discovered something about Apache Diggings," said Bland. His face was stern; his eyes bored at Willy. "This would be a fine thing for Silver. I'm going to ask you to stay away from there, Willy."

Willy put down his knife and fork. He

said steadily, "Dick, you sure you know what you're doin'?"

"Everybody in this town—except you—thinks Bodley is a mighty fine man. We couldn't find out anything about that dead fellow you brought in, and Bodley is burying him. He is helping the church people; he is a public-spirited citizen. We want him to stay in Silver—and beating up his miners doesn't help."

Willy said, "You run the town, Dick. You an' Bodley and Mr. Carey and them. I'll take care of my business."

"Your job is with the Cattlemen's Association," said Bland firmly. "You have no call to butt in on mining affairs."

"That's correct," Willy said. "You got anything more to say?" His youthful features were flinty.

The Marshal said tightly, "We've always been good friends. Be reasonable, Willy. Just because Bodley pays attention to Pru and Miz Croy—"

"You sure are talkin' a lot tonight, Dick," said Willy softly. "Don't you feel right good?"

"Mr. Carey asked me to speak to you," said Dick stiffly. He got up. "You're kind of hasty sometimes, Willy. I wouldn't want trouble with you."

"If I start it, you'll have trouble," said Willy. He was suddenly disgusted with the town, with his old friend. "But I won't. Never you fear. You go along, Dick. Stick with Bodley." He turned complete attention to the steak.

He thought of Miz Croy's biscuits and he thought of the flamboyant Bodley "payin' attention" to mother and daughter." He chewed savagely. He had to give Bodley credit though. He had already turned the town against Willy, the Whistler Kid.

CHAPTER 4 *Dead Man's Letter*

The next morning Willy rode down and found Pru in the kitchen alone. He watched her going between stove and work table, deft, quick, smooth in her movements and his heart filled. He said, "Honey, I'm goin' up to Foster Deal's for awhile."

She put her hands on her hips and faced

him, head on one side. "Too much Mr. Bodley, Willy?"

"Somethin' like that," admitted Willy. "Foster and me—we got a lot to talk about. And I ain't rode the range for a year. Feels funny, bein' away from cattle."

She said, "Willy, I don't know. Maybe you're right. This Mr. Bodley is a new sort of man around Silver. If you give him time, it'll be proven what he really is."

"That's the way I see it," said Willy. He stood, diffidently, waiting.

She came across the room and put her arms around him and kissed him. It was a long moment before they parted.

Then he stammered, "I dunno if you feel the way I do. But if you do—autumn is a long way off!" He almost ran to the bay pony.

He rode fast, going up Bear Mountain way to the level plain which was Foster Deal's great ranch. The snowy-haired president of the Cattlemen's Association was glad to see him. They went out and camped, hunting bear in the foothills, they rode range, checking the vast herd. The week passed swiftly and no mention of Mortimer Bodley was made.

Willy came back to Silver tanned and feeling full of good health. He stabled his horse and walked down to Red Morgan's and stood at the bar. To his surprise both Patch Dailey and Delta Horton were at the poker table. They were attired in new, ornate range clothing and both seemed flush with money.

Red Morgan poured the soda pop. Willy said, "Any banks been robbed? Stage held up? Some pore unfortunate lose his poke?"

The one-legged barkeeper said, "Nope. Ain't nothin' happened but the Apache Diggins is turnin' out ore. High grade silver, too."

Willy sipped at his drink. He said, "Bodley was right, then."

"He drew his ten thousand. He bought wagons, brought in miners. He give the church a thousand dollars." Red Morgan rubbed a thumb across his chin. "He lost a couple hundred back to Mr. Carey at poker. The Glory Mine is crushin' his ore. He dug in the one direction nobody else tried and struck a vein."

"Do tell," said Willy. "Guess we musta

been mistaken about that jasper." He slid his eyes sidelong at Red Morgan.

Red said, "Me, I ain't countin' on bein' mistaken."

"Dick ordered me to lay offen him," said Willy.

"Mr. Carey like to snap off my head for droppin' an innocent remark agin him," said Morgan.

"Well, there ain't nothin' we can do about a good man, gives to the church," said Willy piously.

"He's callin' at Miz Croy's regular," said Morgan slowly. "Nobody don't know is he makin' a set at mother—or daughter." It was his turn to watch Willy from the corner of his eye.

Willy's expression did not change. He said mildly, "Has Bodley still got a guard on his mine?"

"Now, how'd you guess that?" Morgan wiped the bar with a rag. "Claims he has developed a new method he ain't ready t' give to the world yet. Claims it'll revolutionize minin' methods."

Willy said, "How else is he goin' to help the world?"

"He's startin' an orphan asylum," said Red soberly. "For miner kids and the like."

Willy said, "He is a great man. I'll be seein' you later, Red. . . ."

There was huge activity at Apache Diggings. While Willy watched from Indian Leap, a wagon was loaded with ore and started down the trail. Bodley came and went, and Luke, still wearing a bandage on his head, was guarding the road to the Diggings. There was nothing suspicious about the layout. It seemed just another busy mine.

Willy rode back up to Glory. Bud Lott came out and grinned at him.

"You been in the diggings?" asked Willy.

"Nobody'll get in there without a bullet in him. Those babies Bodley brought in are tough." Bud squinted his eyes at his friend. "It's kinda funny, though. Apache Diggins was plumb finished. The Syndicate had their best men look at it last year. There was some low grade in it, sure. But this is the highest assaying ore in years around here."

Willy said, "You seen samples?"

"Swiped one," said Bud, happy as a

lark. "It assays right up with our ore."

Willy said, "Uh-huh." He was whistling again. He said, "Like to go down into Glory. Haven't been there for years."

Bud said, "Go ahead—I got work to do. Bull will send a man to guide you."

"I know the way," said Willy.

He walked down the shaft which plunged steeply southward. This was the oldest of the diggings, one with which he was familiar. The other galleries went off from it, like creeks from a river. He kept to the main shaft until the only light was from the lantern he had picked up at the entrance. The sound of star drills was off to the right.

It was the south passage in which he was interested. Not much Glory mining had been done in this direction. He explored for hours, wandering up and down. But at last he came to the southernmost of the Glory Mine reaches and there he stayed another hour.

THEN he turned his foot steps upward.

It was difficult to judge, in the dimness, how far he was south of the main entrance. He tried to figure it, but it was no use. He clambered out of the mine, covered with dust and dampness and went into the office. He stared at the big map of the diggings which was on Bud's wall. The southern part of the mine was less defaced with explanatory tracings than any other. Yet there was no indication that less rich ore abounded southward.

Bud came in and said to him, "You been pokin' around all day. What did you find?"

"I found Glory Mine goes north, east and west, but not south."

"It's because they follow the richest veins. South is Apache Diggins, which is known—or was known—to be played out. So they're leavin' that part of Glory for the last."

Willy said, "Don't suppose Bull would start 'em goin' thataway."

"No reason for it," shrugged Bud.

"Yeah," muttered Willy. "That's what he counted on."

"Who counted on what?" demanded Bud.

"I got to go to town," said Willy. "I'll be back, Bud. Keep yore gun oiled. And—wear it."

It was dark when he hit Silver. He went into Bullock's and the postmaster-undertaker-carpenter was sorting the mail off the late coach.

Willy said, "Larry, you had any dead letters lately? Mebbe to a man which his initials are 'P.Z.'?"

Bullock said, "Now how the hell you know that? Pietro Zazzini is the dinged name. But it ain't a dead letter, because they is a return address, see?" He picked up the letter and held it out.

Willy held it in his hands. His fingers trembled a little, but he read the return address, "Zebra Mining and Engineering Company, New York, N. Y."

Willy said, "Larry, I'd give a heap to read this letter."

The postmaster snatched the envelope. "You wanta go t' jail?"

Willy said, "Nobody'd know it. We could—"

"Monkey with the U.S. mail?" Bullock was limp with awed fear.

"Okay." Willy turned away. The Bowie was still in his boot. The initials "P.Z." burned in his mind. Pietro Zazzini would never collect that letter. Mortimer Bodley had paid to have Pietro buried on boothill.

Willy went down the street thoughtfully and to the Croy cottage. He was on the verandah, ready to knock, when he heard the voice. It was booming;

"Yaas, indeed. Expect t' spend a good ten per cent of all m' profits on good works. Like it says in the Bible—a tithe for the poor an' the church. M' old mother brought me up that way, down in the Saouth."

Pru said demurely, "What part of the south, Mr. Bodley?"

"Er—New Orleans," said Bodley. "Ah'm of an old Louisianny family. Yaas, indeed, Miss Pru, and if I might say so, there was never a fairer flower of the old south than yourself. . . ."

Willy turned and tiptoed down off the porch. There was no doubt who Bodley was courting now. Miz Croy had removed herself from the scene. Pru was alone with the imposing stout man who had taken Silver by storm.

A recklessness came on Willy Wooten—a resentment of Miz Croy's placid acceptance of Bodley, of the town's gulli-

bility where the smooth-tongued faker was concerned. It sent him hurrying to the back of Larry Bullock's place. After awhile the lights of Bullock's went out and Larry turned the key in the lock of the front door and walked off.

Willy waited a moment. The town was quiet. When he moved out from the shadow of the shed, he held the Bowie knife in his hand.

He gained the rear door, which was fastened with a stout padlock. The padlock hooked through a staple which was spraddled on the inside of the planking of the heavy door. Willy attacked the wood with the heavy, sharp Bowie.

In a moment or two Willy had caught the grain and was peeling off slivers around the staple. He made an elliptical design and leaned against the jamb in the darkness, working by touch. He whistled a little, under his breath. He was doing a wild and foolish thing, breaking in here, but he felt justified. He and Red Morgan were the only two men in town not bewitched, and Red had a wooden leg. That left only Willy to get around.

He finished his circle. The staple fell out. Willy reached in and unlatched the door.

He went into the shop, tiptoed across to the tiny post office. There were no other locks. The letter reposed in the same niche where Bullock had placed it. Willy reached for it.

Behind him a voice grated, "Okay, smart hombre, I'll take that."

It was no time nor place to be caught. Willy recognized the voice at once—Patch Dailey. If Horton was with him. . . But there wasn't time to think. Willy had to act. He dropped to the floor, flat as a flounder, down below the level of Bullock's counter.

There was no shot. Dailey did not want attention, either. He wanted the letter.

Willy edged to the end of the counter. He was about to stick out his head when he thought he saw motion. Across the room, against the wall, Dailey was attempting the same maneuver.

Dailey's voice came, triumphant, harsh, "I got a bead on yuh, kid. Gimme that letter or I'll drill yuh and say I caught yuh burglin' the joint."

Willy said, "I'll give it to you."

He threw the Bowie with a flipping, underhand motion. It was an old trick he had learned from a Spanish miner, a Basque who was expert at knives.

He heard Dailey gasp, and was across the room like a wildcat, his gun swinging. He put the barrel against Dailey's hat and caught the man in his arms as he fell. He dragged Dailey across the room and threw him into the back lot.

Dailey had dropped his gun inside. Willy left the door ajar, left the gun where it was. He bent over Dailey. The knife was in his throat. It had been a very lucky cast. Willy wiped the knife, on the grass, sunk it carefully in sand to clean it thoroughly.

He decided to let Dick Bland figure this one out for himself. He walked away, taking a most circuitous route. He went to the hotel and turned on the kerosene lamp. He wanted to read the letter he had illegally pilfered.

It said:

Dear Pietro:

We expected to hear from you before now. What has happened out in Silver? We have another job for you, farther north. A man thinks he has found something good in gold. Your engineering experience is just what is needed on this job, so wind things up there and communicate with me.

*Yours,
Mike*

*Michael Sand, Pres.
Zebra Mining and Engineering Co.
New York, N. Y.*

Willy went back to Bullock's and put the letter in its place. He no longer cared who saw it now. He knew what he wanted to know.

CHAPTER

5

"Bodley's Mine!"

There was no sleep for Willy Wooten that night. He selected a pair of soft moccasins and shoved them into his belt, went down and saddled his bay pony. There was still no hue and cry, so Dailey had not been discovered. He wondered where Horton was, decided the southerner had plans of his own. Horton had always been cleverer than Dailey.

He rode up to Glory Mine as fast as

the cayuse could climb the mountain. He went into Bud's cabin and touched his friend on the shoulder. Bud came to his feet in one motion, a gun in his hand.

Willy said, "We got work to do."

Bud said, "Lemme get my pants."

Willy said, "P.Z. was an engineer. He was inspectin' the Apache Diggin's. Whatever he found didn't please Bodley, so he was killed."

Bud said, "What's it all mean?"

"There is somethin' mighty peculiar goin' on in the diggin's. Gotta find out what it is," said Willy.

"But there's sixteen tough hard-rock men guardin' the place," objected Bud. "How you goin' to get inside?"

Willy said, "With a good stout rope."

Bud said, "You can't go down off the Leap—" He stopped, stared at Willy. He said, in a different tone, "You're light and strong. You can do it. But you'll get caught sure as shootin'—and there'll be shootin'."

"There's *been* shootin'," corrected Willy. "Let's go."

They purloined a coil of good manilla rope and started their journey. Willy was wearing the moccasins, Bud his mining boots. They came to Indian Leap and Willy said:

"Y' see how close the diggin's is to the south gallery?"

Bud said, "Yeah. Never thought of that. Is that it?"

"Got t' be. If Zazzini found out different, he wouldn't 've been shot."

Bud said, "It'd take months t' prove it. And court litigation—the Syndicate hates the courts. It's clever, huh?"

"Yeah. Bodley's an awful smart man."

Bud wound the rope around a boulder, knotted it. The coil disappeared down the face of the rock. He said, "It's a risky thing. But I know better'n to try an' stop you, Willy."

The Kid already had on his gauntlets and was testing the rope. He said, "This is my lil ole red wagon and I aim to pull it. You stay right here and be ready t' haul me up fast if I make it, will yuh, Bud?"

"I'm scared. There's too many of 'em," said Bud.

"Okay, you be scared. I ain't got time, right now," grinned the Kid.

He went down over the edge of the cliff. He had selected a spot fifty yards from where they had first seen the body of Zazzini, and he calculated that when he got to the bottom he would be directly in line with the workings of Apache Diggin's. He let himself down very silently, touching his moccasins to the sheer cliff to mark his progress.

He struck bottom without incident. The moon peeked out and he oriented himself by a lone, jutting, stunted pine. The rope's end was long enough to coil behind the little tree.

He began working his way across, now. There was a fissure in the rock, barely large enough for him to manage, but he slid through, holding his revolvers away from the rock lest they click and make a sound. There was a guard on the main road, he knew, but he did not know if there was one on this side. As the approach was over the jagged rock, and blotted out by Indian Leap, he thought there might not be a sentinel here.

He poked his head through the other



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end of the fissure. He almost slapped a man with his hat brim. The man had a rifle across his arm. He was leaning against the rocky wall. He was sound asleep.

Willy paused, weighing his revolver in his hand. He reached out and took hold of the rifle. Then he hit the man behind the ear. The man did not make any noise as he fell.

Willy broke the rifle and emptied it. He squatted, making a small, tight shadow, looking around. He saw the guard down at the main road. The shacks had been repaired and there were hearty snores emanating from each.

There was a horse hobbled near the shacks. Willy crept close. It was Delta Horton's mount. The outlaw was up here, then. It was an unpleasant discovery. The big, dull miners were one thing—Horton another.

He was whistling now, but soundlessly, to himself. He moved toward the entrance to the shaft of the Apache Diggings, drifting like a shadow as the moon played a game of hide and seek with the cloud bank.

There was no guard at the entrance. Puzzled, Willy crawled within. He knew how a rat feels, going into a trap.

The shaft was straight, barren. There was no light. Willy felt his way, only his familiarity with mines allowing him to make progress. He had a tiny lantern attached to his belt, but he was afraid to ignite it.

He found the old diggings at once. They went due west from the main shaft; then there was a shallow tunnel eastward, and to the south a deeper one. He prowled, soft-footed, his hands touching the damp walls.

He was on the north wall, now. He felt his way along. He made a little bend and then he stopped dead. There was a crack of light in what appeared to be solid rock.

He crept closer to the light. His gun came unbidden to his hand. This was what he had expected. This was what he had counted upon.

THERE was a square boulder, fitting loosely into the wall. He put his hand on it and it was contrived so cleverly that

it moved, just a little. It had been placed there, and recently. He moved the balanced stone a bit more and looked through the crack.

There was a chamber, hewn newly from the mountain's bowels. Willy stared, his eyes round as saucers.

There were four men in there, sleeping. A fifth sat on a pallet of straw, his feet cocked up. He held a shotgun in his lap.

The guard was the man known as Luke. The sleeping men had faces pale and gaunt, as though they had not seen the sun for many weeks. One coughed in his sleep and rolled over. There was a clanking of chain.

These men were chained. They were captives, and Luke was guarding them. Willy's mind went around like a squirrel in a cage. He stared until his eyes watered. He almost did not hear the footsteps behind him, coming into the shaft.

Then he did hear them. He scuttled like a land crab for shelter, found it behind a pile of refuse rock. He watched one of the original big three miners who had come at Bodley's bidding—it was one known as Bugs. The hard-faced man was yawning. He was obviously the relief guard.

The rock rolled back at the touch of the newcomer. Luke's heavy voice said, "You're late. Lemme outa this hole."

"Huh," said Bugs. "How 'bout these pore devils? They been here for a month."

"The hell with them, the damn fools," said Luke brutally.

"They done their work," said Bugs. "Horton an' Dailey seen t' that."

"Well, we're gettin' it done now." Luke stretched and came out into the shaft. "A lil more an' Bodley'll put it over an' we can get outa this godforsaken country. I don't like it here."

He rolled the rock back into place. Willy stepped from behind the refuse. It was dark and he moved very quietly. He wondered if he could find the same spot on Luke he had slugged before. He tried very hard to do so.

He dragged Luke to a place behind the refuse pile. Then he went back to the rock and said gruffly, muffling his mouth with his rebosa, "Hey, Bugs, c'mere a minute. Got a drink I saved fer yuh."

Willy rolled the rock back. Bugs stepped

out, and Willy hit him with the muzzle of the revolver, on the jaw. Bugs went down like a felled tree.

Willy stepped into the cave. A man who had wakened stared at him with unbelieving eyes.

Willy searched until he found a chisel piled with other tools in a corner. He went to work on the chains. The man's wrists were swollen and infected. There was a fetid odor in the cave. Willy retched but went grimly on with his job.

The other three men were sitting up. Their wrists and ankles were chained with links measuring about three feet—enough to let them work, but not to move easily. They exclaimed once at sight of Willy, then were silent. Bugs groaned just as Willy got the first chain cut loose.

Willy went over and turned Bugs on his belly, stuffed a gag in his mouth, snapped the chains on his wrists and ankles, linked them with a single strand, hog-tying the big miner as tight as a drumhead.

He went back to his tapping. He said, "There's a dozen of 'em. There ain't no way outa here, without wakin' them. But you wouldn't wanta stay here no more, would yuh?"

The first man said, "Did they kill Pietro?"

"You come in with him? Sure—that's it. Zazzini found there was nothin' to Apache Diggin's and was goin' to say so. But they finished him. So then they made you dig the tunnel north. Horton an' Dailey guarded yuh and then Bodley slipped some more miners up here and they chained yuh. They never meant to let yuh outa here alive, friends. That's for sure."

The first man said, "Just let me get a crack at a couple of these beasts. And that Bodley, that sanctimonious—"

"Now, now," said Willy. "Bodley's mine. Yuh can have the rest, but don't go messin' with Bodley. Get busy and turn loose your friends."

They worked like men reprieved from hanging. In an amazingly few moments they were all free. They identified themselves briefly as Jack, Happy, Morgan and Sandy—all miners trapped by Bodley in his scheme.

Willy said, "There's a rifle outside—

and that shotgun. They'll have to do. Take pick-handles, whatever yuh figger yuh kin do damage with. We're about to do battle!"

CHAPTER**6***Hideout Play*

Willy came out of the entrance to the Diggings all alone. There was one guard he wanted to eliminate—the one at the main road. He knew he could not get his wretched charges back up Indian Leap. He had to get them in a wagon. If it could be accomplished in comparative silence, if he could get a team to the wagon which loomed beside the road and then cover them with fire from his revolvers, they had a chance to make Silver. He had instructed them what to do upon reaching town. As for himself—Bud was waiting.

He slid with all his Indian-taught skill toward the guard at the road-head. The man was against a tree trunk and Willy could not tell whether he slept or was awake. Willy was almost upon him when the door to one of the cabins opened. The moon capriciously slid out and bathed the rock in silver.

The man was Delta Horton. He stopped dead, stared. He had caught Willy between shelters. He said, "Why, you damn Whistler." His hand dropped to his belt—and then he realized he had not worn his gun. He dove back into the miner shack before Willy could shoot.

The guard came away from the tree. The jig was up. Willy fired once. The guard doubled over his rifle and lay still.

Willy leaped for shelter. He turned his gun on the shack into which Delta had disappeared. He threw four shots, spacing them evenly, into the window. He wanted only time now. He saw the released men running. They crossed the clearing, spread out. A shot sounded from within and the one who called himself Sandy went down. Willy ran out, grabbed him, pulled him behind the tree. He had his left hand gun in his right hand now, and was pumping lead. He heard a shout from inside and knew he had scored at least once. Sandy was hit in the shoulder, but conscious. Willy said, "If yuh can get the hosses out. . . ."

He was thumbing cartridges into both

guns. One of the rescued men had the shotgun. The door to another cabin opened on a crack. The shotgun blasted loud in the night and the door swung open. A rough-clad miner fell into view. The men who had suffered so long in captivity were enjoying themselves now. If they could keep the miners bottled up, it might work, Willy thought.

Sandy was trying to get the horses out of the shed. Another shot came from the first cabin. That would be Horton, always smart. The ill-fated Sandy pitched to earth. The third cabin was too far away for the fire of the besiegers to cover it. In a moment men would get out, and then Willy knew he could not pull it off.

He kept pouring it to Horton's cabin. He riddled the sills, the door. No one came from there. The shivering trio would be out of ammunition in a moment and then Willy would have to move.

Horton shouted, "Hold your fire, I'll tell you when t' make a move."

He knew about the ammunition. Horton always figured things. Willy hesitated, balancing his freshly loaded, hot guns. His men had ceased firing. He did not know if they had shells left. He was in a quandary.

Horton's southern voice said, "Now's the time, boys. Out and at 'em."

His own door did not open. But the farthest one did. Men poured out. There were only three shots fired. Each man had saved one. They counted. Two of the charging men went down.

Willy moved. Bullets singed him, but he was unhit. He chose a spot near the head of the road. He crouched there, working his gun. He emptied one, switched and emptied the other. Men went down, but Horton's gang would come out in a moment and it would be all over.

It was then the horses came thundering. They came straight through the miner group, at their backs. Horton jumped from the door of his cabin.

Willy stepped into the clearing. He said, "Here, Delta!"

Horton, intent upon shooting the horses, had no choice. He had to turn and try for Willy. The black gun of Bronch Wooten raised to hip level, the young son of the old warrior snapped a single shot.

Horton went over backwards. A rifle thundered. It was only then that Willy saw the figure astride the off horse of the team. It was an unmistakable figure, lean and slope-shouldered. It was Bud Lott, with a rifle under his arm, picking off men as though they were clay pigeons. Bud had not waited.

The rescued men came racing on tottering legs. Trembling fingers hitched the horses to the wagon. Bud whooped, "Should we clean 'em out, Willy?"

"Git in that wagon," snapped Willy.

There were more of Bodley's hard-bitten crew. He was reloading, edging away, trying to draw their fire. He seemed to bear a charmed life indeed, moving in the moonlight, handling his big revolvers with magic fingers. He picked off a charging man and backed to the tailgate.

One of the men he had saved yelled, "All set!"

He made a backward leap, landed sitting. The horses bolted down the rough trail. They spoiled his aim, or he would have had another victim. . . .

In the Knave of Spades there was a informal meeting of the businessmen of Silver. Bull Slavin was there, his chin in his rumpled shirt front, saying nothing. Red Morgan stayed stiffly behind the bar. But the others were eager to hear the golden words of Mortimer Bodley.

Bodley said, "Yawl know how we have succeeded at the Diggin's. It's been a wonderful thing t' see how this heah town had responded to mah success.

"Yaas, indeed," Bodley beamed. "Well, neighbors, the time has come when I can share even fu'ther my good fortune. I have, as yawl know, spent much money on Apache. It's payin'—but I want to do biggeh things, gents. So, at this fust oppo'tunity, I am goin' to let yawl share and share alike with me in this great ente'prise."

Mr. Carey said, "You mean you're going to let us buy into Apache?"

"**T**IN ORDEH that we all share alike," beamed Bodley. He pulled out of a bag a heap of stiff white parchment. "I am goin' to sell to each and eve'y friend o' mine heah a part of this wonde'ful new prop'ty I have developed up yondeh in the mountains. I am goin' t' use this

money so obtained to fu'theh expand until Apache—with all due respect to my friend, Mr. Slavin—is the biggest silver mine in this heah Territo'y!"

Mr. Carey said, "Well, that's somethin'. No eastern money this time, eh, Bodley? Silver for Silver!"

"You jest said somethin' great, friend Carey! Silveh fo' Silveh! Let that be the slogan that—"

Behind Bodley the doors to the Knave of Spades swung open. Three men walked in. They were pinched, ghostly, tattered men. Their wrists and ankles stank from the festering wounds plainly exposed.

Mortimer Bodley's mouth made an O; his hands suddenly could not hold the papers.

Then he said, "Why Jack! Happy! Morgan! Now wheah in the world you boys been? You git lost in the mountain?"

The men said nothing. They just stared at Bodley.

Willy Wooten and Bud Lott stepped in the back door. Dick Bland turned, scowling. Jack, who was the one Willy had first freed, spoke for the freed captives.

"So you're selling stock, Bodley? In that mine we dug over to Glory for the ore?"

Bodley said, "Now boys, you wouldn't go off half-cocked, would you?" His southern accent was slipping.

"Nice ore," said Jack. "Assays right up to Glory ore. It ought to. You chained us and made us dig all the way over. No one knew we were there—you had Zazzini bring' us in secretly. You said it was merely good business. But Zazzini caught on, didn't he? So you had him shot."

Dick Bland said sharply, "Who are you? What is this?"

The drawn face of the miner turned to Bland. He said, "This smooth talker took us in too. And we've been chained like beasts, working that tunnel to the north, which runs into a lode they haven't yet worked at Glory. There's no silver in Apache Diggings. He only wants to sell that stock, take the money he gets from you and run."

Bodley went to pieces all at once when he did go. Willy had been watching for it. Willy had seen many a good man in a tight and he wondered about Bodley. The big

fellow was a smart one—but how was his courage?

Bodley said, "All a mistake. Man's demented. You can see that." His speech was incisive now, rapid. "I can explain. Tomorrow. . . ." He was actually backing to the door. But Willy knew Bodley never expected to make that door. Willy was watching. . . .

Bodley spun as Dick Bland finally stepped forward. Then the sleeve gun was in his hand. It was a single shot, .50 caliber hideout gun. Bodley had maneuvered to be within ten feet of Willy when he snapped the thing into his hand.

He had the courage all right. Willy's own hand moved. The black Colt slid from the old, slick holster, and no one saw the manner of its sliding. The bark of the two guns sounded almost as one.

Almost, but not quite. Willy had been watching. No man ever beat the Whistler Kid to the draw, not even with a sleeve gun. Bodley went sideways, then lunged forward, clutching at his middle. He went down and struck the table, and the stiff paper certificates scattered on the floor.

Willy said, "He did have the nerve. He knew the deal was closed, but he made his play. He was a dirty devil, but quite a rascal."

They were turning to him now, the businessmen of the town, their faces scarlet, their minds in a whirl. But Willy was gifted beyond the ordinary young man. Sometimes he knew it was not politic to be wiser than older men.

He said, "I figgered it out on this Zazzini, you see? The Bowie had his initials on it. He was an easterner an' Larry Bullock lemme look at a letter. . . ."

Blank said, "Dailey broke into Larry's and got stabbed."

"After that letter, no doubt," said Willy mildly. "Well, then I went up there and those pore fellers was held like slaves. Let 'em tell yuh about it. They know more'n me."

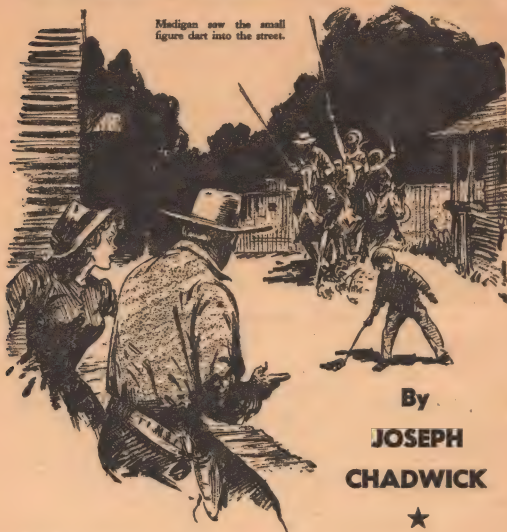
Bud Lott grinned. Willy said, "I got me a date to do some more of thet heavy courtin'. Won't Miz Croy bug her eyes, though? C'mon, Bud."

Lott said, "Who, me? For what?"

"T' tell Miz Croy, o' course," said Willy. "I ain't got the nerve."

TEXICAN'S DEADFALL DOOM

Madigan saw the small
figure dart into the street.



By
**JOSEPH
CHADWICK**



THE herd was out of Texas, from south of the Llano River, and it had been pointed north for more days than its drivers remembered. This was Kansas, and Dodge City, trail hands' mecca, lay but three plodding days ahead. "Tomorrow this time," one of the crew stated, "we'll hit Venida."

The word spread all around the great herd. Gaunt Texas men on tired Texas

*Trail-driver Madigan staked his herd
on the blonde faro dealer . . . even
knowing she would steer him into a
tinhorn's mantrap.*

mustangs grinned through masks of dust and sweat. All knew of Venida, for Texan riders passed gossip about the rowdy trail town, anticipating its pleasures, the pleasures denied them along hundreds of miles of torturous trail. Hearty appetites were whetted.

At sundown the cattle forded Slough Creek, were turned onto a bed ground. The riders gathered for evening chuck. Most of them peered out across the grass flats, hoping for a glimpse of Venida. The town was but seven miles away, though still out of sight beyond the rolling prairies.

The trail boss, making an order of it, said, "Tomorrow night."

The trail boss' word was law. He was Matt Fletcher, a gray-bearded man of more than sixty who no longer cared about anything any town had to offer. He owned most of the herd. Sam Madigan owned the smaller part, six hundred head. Younger than the trail boss by some thirty years, Madigan understood Fletcher's patience, but his own was hard to curb, and he was tempted to ignore the trail boss' orders and ride to Venida. But after waiting a whole year, one day longer mattered little.

He was a taciturn and poker-faced sort, this Madigan. The crew had sensed from the start that he wasn't to be joshed or crossed. The faraway look in his eyes told that he had something on his mind. He was tall, a big man thinned down to bone and muscle.

His part of the herd was made up of wild brush cattle. Madigan had made the gather with a couple of Mexican vaqueros he'd hired, though mavericks were hard to find and harder to round up. Madigan had held the critters in a big corral for a month, to tame them enough for mixing with range stock for the drive. He owned no ranch—that was about all the trail crew knew about him.

Madigan did keep his own counsel. He was a top hand, the best trail driver in Matt Fletcher's crew. But he remained apart from the men he worked, ate and slept with, and he was aloof even now with the easy talk about Venida circling the camp fire.

Sam Madigan saw his concealed feelings mirrored on a dozen faces. The only difference was in intensity. His desires

were a driving force, and so he could not talk about them in bantering tone. But he listened.

"All I want is enough forty-rod to drown in," burly Sebe Graves was saying, sliding his tongue over his thick lips. He grinned. "A barrel won't be too much."

The crew laughed.

"Lanky Milt Shane took it up, 'A couple drinks for me, then I'll buck the tiger.'" He was a born gambler, and forever a heavy loser. "Last year, Venida cleaned me out. This trip I aim to make a killing."

Some of the crew hooted him.

Walt Carmody gave a sly grin. "No gambling for me. I'll be looking over the skirts in the dance hall."

The rider hunkered down next to Madigan fidgeted. It was the kid, young Danny Faber, who was up the trail for the first time. He was wide-eyed and all ears. He looked around at Madigan. "Some fun in Venida?" he asked eagerly.

Madigan took the quirly cigarette from his lips. "Depends on what a man calls fun," he said. "You watch your step in that town, kid."

"Sure," said Danny, but uncertainly. "Why?"

"It's a tough town. Only one reason for it being where it is—to pick the pockets of riders who come up-trail with cattle."

"You been there, Madigan?"

"Yeah. A year ago."

"Something happen to you, maybe?"

Madigan was silent a moment, eying the kid and remembering when he himself had been an eager seventeen. It was the memory that made him say more. "Something happened to me, all right," he said, flat-voiced.

"A woman baited me into a crooked poker game. A friendly back-room game, they called it. I caught on to the marked deck. I used my sixgun to get a new deck—one that wasn't rigged. I had some luck. Started with forty dollars and ran it up to more than five hundred."

The kid prompted, "What then?"

Madigan's voice turned sour. "You can't get away with a killing in Venida. Those sharpers didn't like the idea of bucking my gun, so they called for a round of drinks. Mine was drugged. When I came to, next morning, I was lying in a ditch back of town—with my

pockets turned inside out. They'd taken my gun, and I was sick as a dog. But I went back."

"You got your winnings?" young Danny asked.

Madigan tossed the quirky butt into the fire. He saw that the rest of the crew was silent and listening. "I got a beating," he muttered. "Three hardcases jumped me, and I ended up in the ditch a second time. That's the kind of fun you're apt to have in Venida."

The kid swallowed and said nothing.

Burly Sebe Graves said, "Reckon you won't be going into Venida this trip, Madigan?"

Madigan stood up. "I'll be going in," he said flatly, and turned away. He got his bedroll from the wagon, and spread it out. Lying in his blankets, Madigan wasn't sure that a need for revenge drew him back to Venida. His desires were no different than those of Sebe Graves, Milt Shane and Walt Carmody. He wanted whiskey that wasn't doped. He wanted to sit in a card game that wasn't crooked. And he wanted a woman to smile on him—the one woman who had been to blame for what happened to him a year ago!

FLETCHER and Madigan's herd was turned into a broad hollow cut through by a shallow creek, a mile south of Venida. It was late in the afternoon. Another trail herd was moving in from the southwest, and a third was already held closer to the town.

Matt Fletcher and three of his riders, old-timers like himself, were staying with the cattle. He told the others, "Your night to howl, boys. But we'll hit the trail at sunup, no matter how many sore heads you bring back."

They let out Texas yelps, rushed to the remuda for fresh mounts. They lit out singly and in pairs, like so many kids let out of school for a parade. Madigan was last to go, and he cautioned Danny Faber, "Watch your step, bucko."

The kid grinned, rode out.

Madigan had his own string of horses, and he shifted his saddle gear to a big, gelded dun. He took his rifle along, in its saddle boot, and he had his sixgun belted on.

He rode toward Venida at an easy lope. Half a dozen houses and a couple business places were a-building. Settlers had come into the section. Farm houses and buildings dotted the distance. There were fences and plowed fields.

Madigan rode into the town, and the deadfalls—the saloons, gambling houses, and honkatonks—were still there. He headed for the plank building that bore a sign reading: *Cole's Barber Shop*. Madigan had it all planned. A bath, a shave, and a haircut. Then a meal. Afterward, he would look up the woman.

It was dark when Madigan stepped from the St. Louis Cafe, but Venida's doorways and windows were aglow. The town came alive at night. A big bunch of riders—Madigan tallied twenty-two—came jogging in from the south. A hard-looking bunch. Their horses were marked with the XOX mark. A Texas outfit. Madigan guessed they were from the trail herd he'd seen to the southwest that afternoon.

The bunch rode along the short street and back, looking at things. Half a hundred saddle mounts already stood racked along the street. The swing doors of the saloons were busy. A stooped man in faded overalls and shapeless hat came from the general store. A farmer. He gave Madigan an uncertain look that may have had some dislike in it.

Madigan thought, *Another year, friend, and this'll be your town.*

He saw how the plains country was changing. More and more settlers in Kansas. They'd even come into the Texas cattle country. Madigan crossed the street and turned into the biggest deadfall—the Alhambra.

It wasn't changed. The same two men were behind the bar, the one very bald and the other very fat. The dudish owner, Stace Durant, stood at his look-out place at the far end of the long bar. The gambling layouts were the same. The pianist still was in the far corner. The same sort of motley crowd, trail hands and drifters, filled the place.

Durant was quick. His alert eyes recognized Madigan at once. He frowned, then took out a cigar. Durant didn't smoke. He chewed on a cigar.

Madigan moved along the bar. "Have

a drink with me, Durant?" he asked. "Sure."

They each had two drinks, Madigan buying and then Durant. The XOX crowd came in. Some of the Fletcher crew were already there. The percentage girls mingled with the crowd, smiling artificial smiles.

Stance Durant watched Madigan, his dark eyes uneasily remembering a year ago. He had been in that tinhorn game in the backroom, and one of his bartenders had fixed that doped drink. It had been Durant who had put the hardcases onto Madigan the next morning.

Madigan said, "Lil still here?"

Durant nodded. "She'll be down to open her faro bank at eight."

"Half an hour yet," Madigan stated. He glanced beyond the piano player to the stairs. "Time enough for Lil and me to talk. Any objections to my going upstairs?"

Anger glinted in Durant's eyes, but beyond that he was expressionless. "I want no trouble with you, Madigan," he said. "A year ago you got dead drunk after making a killing at poker. Somebody robbed you—after you left the Alhambra. You came back the next morning claiming you'd been drugged. If you still think that and—"

"I more than think it. I know."

"I'm warning you not to pull anything."

"A lot of Texans in town tonight, Durant," Madigan said. "You don't know how many of them are my friends."

Durant's anger faded. His eyes became wary. "I'm thinking about that," he retorted. "That's why I want no trouble with you. I'm not admitting you

were drugged that night, but if you have a grudge to work off, do it in a sensible way. Don't turn a lot of wild Texans loose in Venida. You don't want to do anything crazy."

"You don't know what I want, Durant," Madigan said. "That's why you've got the wind up. I'll talk to Lil, then let you know what I do want out of this man-trap of a town."

He turned, strode toward the stairway. The piano-player was tormenting tinny music from his instrument. A big-hatted Texan was dancing with one of the percentage girls. It was Walt Carmody. He gave Madigan a wink.

HER voice said, "Come in." It was pleasantly husky, provocative. Lil Marvin's voice was just as Madigan had remembered it for a whole year. He had knocked at her door, one of a dozen along a narrow hall, and now he opened it. The woman's back was to him. She sat across the little room at a table, peering into a wall mirror as she painted her face. She wore a dress of dark green velvet, form-fitting at the bodice and billowy of skirt, playing up her blonde hair. Even before seeing her face, a man would know that she was attractive beyond ordinary women.

The room was full of frills, the air cloyed with perfume. Madigan closed the door, stood with his back to it, not speaking.

Lil Marvin said peevishly, "Well, what do you want, Stace?"

Madigan kept quiet.

Lil turned in her chair, and a look of shock spread over her face. "You—" she gasped. She got up hastily. "What do

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you mean, coming here?" she demanded.

Madigan's gaze swept over her. There was sudden fire in his veins. Beside Lil Marvin, any other woman was a pale shade. She was tall and finely molded. Her mouth was full, her eyes wide and a clear green-gray. She was perhaps thirty. How she came to be a faro dealer was her own secret. She was angry, looking at Madigan, but interested too.

Madigan said, "You and I had a talk, last time I was in Venida. It was a sort of understanding. You told me you were sick of this place and this town. You said the right man could take you away."

"And you talked big, saying you were that man," Lil retorted. "I told you the right man had to be more than a trail hand, Madigan. I said he had to be a winner—a big winner, not a small-time loser. I gave you a chance. You had forty dollars in your pocket. I knew you couldn't win at faro, so I steered you to the poker game in the back room. You got cleaned out, Madigan. You lost your forty dollars—and me."

"You saying you don't know how I lost out in that game?"

"I know, all right."

"My last drink was drugged."

Lil's eyes were scornful. "How a man loses doesn't matter," she said. "Your losing proved that you aren't the right man."

Madigan frowned. He had been sure that Lil would be waiting. She was still here in Stace Durant's Alhambra, but she hadn't been waiting for him. His year-old resolve wavered. He asked himself, *How long would I keep wanting her?*

Lil Madigan was looking not so much for one man as for a tool that she could utilize in place of a faro deal box. She wanted a sure winner. She was honest enough to admit that, but it wasn't what Madigan wanted of a woman. His frown lingered. He saw a challenge in Lil's eyes.

"Now you know," she said. "It's your deal."

Madigan put aside his doubt. "There's a trail herd out on the flats," he told her. "Six hundred head of those cattle belong to me. I can take them on to Dodge, and sell them—for enough money to give me a start. Or I can take my chances here

in Venida, tonight. I've got Stace Durant in a corner, because of all the Texans in town. If I ask for another backroom poker game, he'll have to give it to me. What'll it be, Lil?"

"You're game, Madigan. I'll say that much for you."

"It'd be a square game. No marked deck or doped drinks. If I lose, I'll not come back here again. If I win, then it's the start of things for you and me."

Lil's eyes were veiled, calculative. She said slowly, "You're risking a lot for what I can give you. Maybe what I'd be willing to give won't be enough."

"I'll take what you'll give," Madigan said. "If I win."

He turned and went out, closing the door behind him. Before he reached the stairs, he realized that he was a fool. A fool like all Texas trail hands. The long, hard trail up from Texas always ended the same way. A man squandered the small fruits of his labor across mahogany bars, over gaming tables, on fancy women. There was little sense to it, but a man was trapped by the quicksand of his own desires.

Downstairs, Madigan put it up to the swarthy Stace Durant. "My herd is worth six thousand dollars, Durant. We'll play two-handed poker."

Durant chewed nervously on his unlighted cigar. "You're forcing it on me," he muttered. "But I'll give you a chance to work off your grudge. For six thousand dollars."

"If you lose, I'll want five hundred more out of you—what I was robbed of last time I played in your back room."

"All right, Madigan. And I have your word that if you lose, you'll keep your Texans in hand?"

"So long as you don't try any tinhorn tricks."

"This game will have to be later, after the rush lets up here."

"Midnight will do, Durant," Madigan said, and moved away.

He stopped at the bar and joined some of the Fletcher crew in a drink. While he was there, Lil Marvin came downstairs and made her way to her faro table. Her appearance caused a flutter of excitement. Men stared. Some called to her. Lil smiled all around. When she reached her

layout, half a dozen men crowded about ready to place bets. They would lose their money to her faro dealing—and like it.

"Too bad," she would say. "Better luck next time, friend." Her smile would repay the losers. Madigan had seen her at work a year ago. He knew how it was. Lil gave a little of herself to every man who stood by her layout. She wouldn't have much to give to any one man. Still, that was something Madigan understood beforehand.

He passed the faro table on the way out, and Lil turned to him with a mocking smile and asked, "What is it to be, Madigan?"

"I'll be back at midnight."

"Stace Durant won't be an easy loser. It'll be his game you're playing," Lil said. She gazed straight at him, and for the first time her eyes were full of promise.

"I wish you luck, Madigan."

He said, "Thanks," and went on out of the Alhambra.

OUTSIDE, he rolled and lighted a cigarette. Down-street, at one of the smaller saloons, a small group of men were arguing loud and drunkenly. Madigan turned restlessly in the other direction. He saw a woman hurrying along the dark part of the street—ahead where the new houses stood. He heard her call out, "Tommy! Tommy, where are you?" Her voice had a frantic sound.

She came on, peering into dark alleyways, calling some more. She became aware of Madigan, and said, "Excuse me. Did you see a small boy? My son. I put him to bed an hour ago, and now he's gone. He must have climbed out the window. He was talking about a stray puppy at supper—"

Her voice was drowned out by a racket down-street. The half-dozen drunken trail hands that Madigan had heard arguing were now on their horses and coming on at a wild gallop. They yelled and fired off their guns. Madigan took the woman's arm and drew her close to a house, out of harm's way.

Suddenly she screamed and tried to jerk loose. Madigan, too, saw the small figure appear from behind two houses opposite and, with the riders close, dart into the street. Madigan shouted. He

sprang forward, but the yelling bunch swept between him and the youngster. Madigan lost sight of the boy. Then, as the riders streamed by, he saw him huddled on the ground.

Madigan reached him hardly sooner than his mother. He grabbed the limp form up in his arms, for the drunken trail hands had swung their mounts and were racing back. He got his light burden clear of the horses. The woman was trying to take the boy away from him.

"Let me carry him," Madigan said. "Where do you live?"

She was crying silently, deep within herself, but she did not give way to hysteria. She led Madigan to one of the newly built houses, a plank one-storied affair. They entered a lamp-lighted parlor, then a tiny bedroom. Madigan lay the unconscious boy on the bed.

Tommy had corn-silk hair, now stained with blood. His left arm hung at an odd angle. He had been bowled over by one of the horses, thrown hard to the ground. Madigan looked at the woman's blanched face.

"A doctor?"

"There is none!"

"Then it's up to us," Madigan said. He saw that she was going to give way to panic. "Don't worry. I've patched up lots of hurt men—on the range and along the trail. Your boy isn't badly hurt."

He hoped that was an accurate guess.

Madigan set the broken arm while the boy was still unconscious, using splints hastily cut from a store box the woman found in the kitchen. Lacking plaster, he wrapped the splints in place with yards of bandages torn from sheets. The cast could come later.

They washed the youngster's face, treated his cut head with carbolio solution. The four-year-old regained consciousness, surprised to find himself hurt. After a little, he began to whimper. His mother gave him a cup of warm milk. She sat on the bed and held him close. Madigan withdrew to the kitchen. He took a chair, rolled a smoke. He was tired.

She came tiptoeing into the kitchen finally, a smile on her lips and a mist in her eyes. She said quietly, "I'm so grateful. I don't know what I'd have done."

Madigan knew then that the boy was asleep. He rose, picked up his hat, told her he was glad that he had been of help. He added, "Be sure to have somebody make a plaster cast for that arm tomorrow."

She nodded. She gazed at Madigan in a wistful way.

"I wish I could repay you," she worried. Then she smiled. "Perhaps you would like a cup of coffee, and a little something to eat?"

"Well, thanks," said Madigan, seeing that was what she wanted.

He sat down again, and watched her busy herself about the kitchen. An attractive housewife in gingham. Dark hair, dark blue eyes, a complexion with a bloom. Deft and knowing in her movements. She was young, perhaps in her middle twenties. The sort of woman a man would cherish, but not one he would gamble his all for. Madigan felt a little guilty about his careful appraisal of her.

She began to talk as she fixed the coffee, cold meat and biscuits. She was Martha Banning, a widow. Her husband had died six months ago, shortly after they'd come west from Ohio. She had a little money left, but she was determined to earn a livelihood for Tommy and herself. She was doing a little sewing for the settler folk, and baking pies for the restaurant down-street. It was a small income, but it would grow. "This town will grow—and change," she told Madigan.

He had never been so comfortable. There was cream for the coffee, and the biscuits were feather light. The woman's voice was soothing. Madigan kept her talking, drew her out. He realized that she needed to talk to someone, that she was lonely in her widowhood. Only when she spoke of her dead husband did Madigan feel uncomfortable, like an intruder. Martha was not morbidly chained to John Banning's memory, but she cherished it.

Madigan was a little jolted when she told him, flushing, that he was much like her husband had been. Finally he found himself doing the talking. He told her that he had always worked as a cowhand, for wages, until this past year. He mentioned his six hundred head of cattle.

"It's good for a man to strike out for himself," Martha said.

Madigan suddenly remembered that it had been because of another woman, Lil Marvin, that he had gathered those wild brush cattle. He recalled too, uneasily, that he was to sit down at a card table with Stace Durant at midnight. He asked Martha if she knew the time.

She went to the parlor to look at the clock, returned and said, "It's twenty minutes past twelve. I didn't realize it was so late." She saw Madigan's frown. "Is something wrong?"

Madigan rose, picked up his hat. "I had something to do at midnight." He moved to the door. "I hope Tommy feels better soon," he told her.

"Won't you stop in to see him tomorrow?"

"The herd will be on the trail at sun-up."

"Oh."

Madigan sensed her disappointment. He was reluctant to go, somehow. He tried to think of Lil Marvin, but the picture of her was hazy.

"I'll stop by to see Tommy if I come through Venida again," he said. And then, since Martha merely nodded, he turned and went out. Madigan did not know why he felt, closing the door, that he had shut something good out of his life. It was whiskey and gambling and a woman like Lil Marvin he wanted. *Remember, Madigan?*

THE town was quieter. There were fewer lighted windows along the street. Many of the riders had returned to their trail camps, knowing that their trail bosses would have them in the saddle at earliest dawn despite the stop-over at Venida. Madigan saw two men take to their horses in front of a saloon and head out at a lope. He walked toward the Alhambra, was close to its swing doors when a voice called his name.

Madigan halted, said, "That you, Danny?"

The youth came from the dark doorway of the general store opposite. Even in the darkness Madigan could see that Danny's blue eyes were round and bright with excitement.

"I've been watching for you, Madigan," he said, in a hoarse whisper. "I was in the Alhambra about an hour ago, and that

woman faro dealer asked if I knew you. She said that I was to see you before you got back inside the place."

"See me about what?" Madigan broke in.

"She said to tell you that the cards will be stacked against you," Danny said. "She wanted you warned about something."

Madigan nodded, said, "I know. Thanks, Danny. You'd better hightail it for camp and get some shut-eye." He gave the kid's shoulder a friendly grip, then went on to the Alhambra.

Reaching the batwings, Madigan hesitated. Since Lil had sent him a warning, he could count on Stace Durant pulling some tinhorn play. This time it wouldn't be marked cards. Or a doped drink. What he must guard against Madigan couldn't guess. He would have to see Lil.

He shoved open the swing doors, stepped inside. The big room was deserted except for half a dozen stay-late patrons, and half the lamps had been darkened. The gambling layouts were closed down, but Lil Marvin sat at her faro table. Only one man was back of the bar. Percentage girls and piano-player were gone from the floor.

Stace Durant lounged in the doorway of his office, dark face unreadable and teeth closed tight on an unlighted cigar. Two men sat drinking at a table, while four others—three in a group and one alone—stood at the bar with their backs toward Madigan.

Durant said, "You're late, Madigan."

Madigan nodded. "Something turned up."

"Maybe you changed your mind about that poker game."

"No," Madigan said flatly.

He stared at Lil. She sat very still. She had a pale, frozen look. Not meeting Madigan's gaze, she said, "I changed my mind, Madigan. I'm backing out of the deal." Her voice rose, became shrill. "Madigan, get out of here!"

Madigan frowned, looked back at Durant. The saloonman's gaze shifted toward the far end of the bar. The three men there in a group turned about, and Madigan recognized them. These were the three Venida hardcases who had jumped him, on Durant's orders, that

morning a year ago. Lil's reason for looking so queer was easily understood.

Durant wasn't going to risk six thousand dollars in a showdown poker game. Nor was he going to give Madigan a chance to rally a bunch of Texas trail hands to see that he got a square deal. These three were men with guns for hire, and tonight Durant had hired them. It was to be a shoot-out—not a showdown at cards—and no Texans would guess Stace Durant had a hand in the game.

Lil screamed it. "Madigan, get out of here!"

But he had no chance to back out. Madigan was trapped. The three hardcases were spreading out. One bellowed, "We told you a year ago to keep away from this town."

They were pulling their guns, and Madigan, drawing his own weapon, knew that he couldn't get all three. But he could get Stace Durant. He pivoted, firing, but Durant had backed into his office, was closing the door. Madigan's slug ripped through the door. He thought Durant cried out.

He did not stop his movement, and now, as the hardcases fired at him, he flung himself down behind the near end of the bar. He heard one of the gunmen curse, and growl, "Hell, he's took to cover. Get him!"

Behind Madigan, from the batwings, a rifle opened up. He jerked about and saw the kid—Danny Faber—there blazing away with his saddle gun. He saw too that the kid was scared, not shooting straight, and, exposed like that, was sure to go down. Madigan raised up, fired at the trio. He targeted one, saw him go down, swung his gun toward another. He missed that shot, but suddenly the two still standing, not liking the evened up odds, threw down their guns and lifted their hands high.

"Enough, Madigan!" one yelled jumpily. "Let up!"

The bartenders and the three customers had hit the floor. Lil Marvin was pressed against the far wall. Madigan glanced at the kid.

Danny grinned. He looked steadier now, and said, "I figured you'd need help."

Madigan nodded his thanks, told him to

keep the two hardcases covered. He crossed and shoved open the office door. Stace Durant lay on the floor, agony twisting his face. He had been hit in the left side.

Lil came and caught hold of Madigan's arm, as though afraid he would shoot Durant again. He pulled loose of her. Lil dropped to her knees beside the man, sobbed a little. Seeing them together, Madigan understood how it was with Lil Marvin. She and Stace Durant were two of a kind. She would talk of leaving Durant's sort of life. She might even go off with some man who came up-trail from Texas. But she would always return. Whether she knew it or not, Lil was Durant's woman.

Madigan backed out, easier in his mind now. He said to the kid, "Danny, let's get out of here."

No shots were fired after them as they took to their horses. As they rode from Venida, Danny said, "That's a tough town, Sam. But I guess you got even, eh?"

Madigan nodded. The kid was right. Madigan was sure now that that had been his real reason for returning to Venida. To get even.

* * *

Madigan swung away from the trail

herd, and headed toward Venida. It was sun-up, and the cattle were plodding past the still sleeping town. Nobody but Madigan was upon the street, but the storekeeper now opened his door. The Alhambra, like the other deadfalls, lacked signs of life at such a time of day.

Ahead, smoke puffed from a pipe chimney—atop Martha Banning's house. Madigan rode to the rear, and Martha appeared instantly in the kitchen doorway. Perhaps she had been waiting. Her smile was as bright as the new sun. Madigan removed his hat.

"I've changed my plans," he said. "I'll sell half my cattle at Dodge, take the money I get and the rest of the herd for the start for a ranch. In Wyoming, maybe. It'll take a little time to get settled, maybe a year. I thought you'd like to know what I've decided."

"Yes," Martha said softly. "I'm very interested."

"I'll let you know what luck I have."

"I'll be anxious to hear from you," Martha Banning told him.

It was exactly what Madigan wanted her to say. He looked at her a moment longer, etching the picture of her on his memory. Then he smiled and rode on, up-trail, telling himself that he would try to get back in less than a year.

WOLF BAIT

One of the methods used for trapping wolves for their pelts involved the use of strychnine instead of spring traps. After the "wolfing" camp had been established, a number of buffalo were brought down, their carcasses cut into quarters and the quarters impregnated with the poison.

The next step was to toss a poisoned buffalo quarter on the ground at a likely spot, and fasten it there by driving a stake through the meat into the ground—this to prevent the husky wolves from dragging the bait away. Strips of the poisoned meat were scattered in a circle about the quarter.

During the night the wolves, having smelled the meat, drifted in for a feast, gobbled up the small strips as they approached the quarter, then fed ravenously on the main dish. The poison acted quickly. Sun-up would find perhaps a few dozen dead wolves within the immediate vicinity of the strychnine-treated buffalo meat. This was wolf trapping on a mass production basis. It saved the time and trouble of setting, checking and retrieving from many scattered spring traps.

—J. W. Q.

MECCA AT MEDICINE BOWS

Coloring at her own impulsiveness, she drew back. . . .



By **TOM W.
BLACKBURN**



*Steve brushed off a bride and bucked
a grave-making blizzard . . . to run a
strange woman's errand.*

IT WAS a small envelope of heavy manila paper with a Chicago post-office box as a return address. It was stamped *Merchandise, Important*. It had been wrapped in a little packet with two other letters addressed to Steve St. John.

The Arapahoe courier had been frozen in a drift below Two-Mile Ford between three days and a week when wind uncovered his body and Steve discovered him and the pouch.

Steve St. John sat huddled over his glowing little iron stove, taking what com-

fort he could from the fact that he was maintaining the only post on the whole eastern slope of the Medicine Bows open for winter trading. It would pay dividends when the summer trade season opened, but was hard now, with Lola Mantel singing in a hotel in Denver City. The Arapahoes were incredible trail men, but it had cost one his life to try to bring three letters up from Denver to the St. John post at La Porte.

One of the two letters addressed to Steve was from Lola. It was written in a blocky, childish hand, wholly unlike Lola's graceful, lushly mature body. But what she said was like Lola. Winter was a lonely time. Bar singing was hard work for an honest girl.

How could her heart keep warm if Steve St. John was seventy miles away across the drifted snow? Who cared if a man kept his post open so the trappers could know there was a place they could get help and supplies in an emergency? There was whiskey and good poker games and even work in Denver City. She was in Denver City. Steve had better use his head.

It was sprinkled with cheap perfume, this letter. And it was signed with love.

The other letter addressed to Steve was from McGivern, concerning a shipment of rifle barrels, cutlery, and traps which couldn't start out for La Porte until this unseasonable cycle of blizzards had let up and a pack train could be risked on the trip. Because McGivern was a good friend who understood the courage and the wisdom of what Steve was attempting at La Porte, the last few lines of McGivern's letter had advice, also:

"I'm afraid you didn't get that filly you left down here rightly halter-broke," McGivern wrote. "She's running to pasture and a mite too frisky, if you're figuring to drop harness on her in the spring. Don't know as I'm sure she could be broke out to pull her load in the traces at all, boy."

"But if you aim to try, you better lock up your place and come down for a spell. Wish I could send you a man to relieve you, but I can't find one crazy enough to tackle even the foothills in this kind of weather. Maybe nobody'd hit your place while you're gone, anyways."

Steve scowled at both of these letters. He was worried. He loved Lola Mantel. At least, he thought he did. Maybe she was frisky, like McGivern said, but he had been holed up at La Porte for two long months, already, and there was a lot of life in Lola. It would be almost as hard for her to wait for spring to come as it was for Steve.

He supposed he could lock up for ten days, plow his way down to Denver City. He could leave his post long enough to straighten Lola out and explain all over again that a man in a trading post had to pay for the trade which came to him. He was their contact with the outside. He had to give them service and sympathy and help when they needed it.

Maybe ten days wouldn't make much difference. Steve figured it in his mind. He could get in a supply of wood. He could leave his door unlocked and a note in three languages—English, trading-French, and Indian-sign—on the door, welcoming anybody in his absence and telling them to take what they needed of his stores.

It wouldn't be as satisfactory to a trapper who came in on an emergency trip, but—a man needed a wife if he was going to make something of himself in the mountains. And Steve St. John needed somebody with whom to plan and build. It was lonely at La Porte when there was no trade.

Steve felt better until he looked again at the third letter which had been in the courier's pouch. The letter with the Chicago return and the stamping: *Important*. This letter had gone via the American Fur Company to Laramie, en route to its addressee at Muddy Gap, North Park, Colorado Territory. The Laramie factor had returned it to Council Bluff marked *Undeliverable—snow*.

It had gone out from Council Bluff with some late-season traveller to Fort Bridger. Fort Bridger had returned it marked simply *Winter*. Finally it had come by government mail contract to Denver City. Someone there had sent it on to St. John's Post at La Porte.

To Rosemary Darniel, North Park, it said. And it was important merchandise. Steve fingered the envelope. He could not indentify its contents. Something

small. A trinket, perhaps. Or maybe medicine. There were a couple of big medicine houses in Chicago. And the addressee was a woman.

Steve's mind pictured North Park as trapper's country. But there were a few settlers who had moved in on mountain hay lands. Grim, courageous folks. The kind which built a country and made a trader prosper. And where there were settlers and women, there were children. It was really the kids which gave a new country permanence.

He could see a work-worn woman, cut off by closed trails from the outside, desperately mailing an order to a medicine house in Chicago for the powder or the pills one of her youngsters needed so desperately. He could see a gaunt man hunched beside a corner bunk in his square cabin, watching a sick youngster and unable to attempt getting outside because he didn't dare leave his family alone in the hills in the middle of the winter. Steve sat by his stove and sweated as he looked over the mountains.

Steve didn't have a mail contract. Only a fool would have forwarded this letter to him. Only a fool wouldn't know that nobody went up the Poudre Canyon in winter. This letter was no obligation of his. Lola Mantel was in Denver, and if he was going to have a woman at La Porte, he'd have to get to Denver in a hurry. He couldn't worry about the impossible. It would be easier to tie a rock to this letter and throw it up onto the moon than to get it through to North Park and Muddy Gap and Rosemary Darniel.

Steve set out emergency gear on the big table in the main room of his post and wrote the notice in three languages for his door and readied his own trail equipment. But all the time he kept looking at the brown manila envelope with the Chicago return address and he kept thinking about the woman waiting helplessly in her little cabin at Muddy Gap. He kept thinking of Rosemary Darniel, when he should have been thinking of Lola Mantel kicking up her heels impatiently with gambling men in Denver City because Steve St. John was off in the hills.

And when he finally stepped outside his post with a pack on his back, the

brown manila envelope was in his pouch and he did not turn south and eastward, where Denver City lay. Instead he turned full west.

THE Poudre was a tumbling river, fast and full of water, and it had cut itself deeply into the flanks of the mountains. There had been high wind with light snow for two days at La Porte. This storm was not as dangerous for the snow it carried as for its savage fridity and the fact that such a wind re-worked the drifts of earlier snows, piling them incredibly. Danger lay in the wind and the cold, in the changing of landmarks and the incredible strength of the gale.

Steve St. John slogged along through drifts and barrens along the banks of the Poudre, watching the great storm on the high peaks sullenly gathering force. As the Poudre worked into the hills, canyon walls gave some shelter. Steve moved steadily, gaining what time he could.

He had it worked out in his mind. He would stay on the trail until he reached the Narrows of the canyon. He'd hole up at the Narrows, where wind and water had scooped out an overhang, build him a big fire. He'd have him a night's rest and a couple of hot meals. And if luck was with Steve the storm now on the peaks would break while he was there.

Thirty miles above the Narrows—which would be another good day—he'd be at the base of Cameron's Pass, the Ute's pass and the Arapaho's pass. There was exceptionally heavy timber just under the rock-line here, so that a man could easily toss up a sound shelter in it. He'd rest again at the base of the pass, cooking another hot meal or two, and waiting for a promising break in the weather to make a dash over the summit.

Once in North Park, he'd halt at the first settler's cabin he found for further rest and directions on how to find the place where this Rosemary Darniel lived. Or he'd find a Park man who'd be neighborly enough to take the letter on from there.

It wasn't impossible—if a man held tight to what he knew of mountain trails and didn't bite more than he could chew. A week, Steve thought, and he'd be back at his post at La Porte, checking to see

if a drifter had stopped in on him while he was gone. Then he'd be moving on down across the foothills and the flats to Denver City—and Lola.

Remembering Lola made soft hairs under the lobes of Steve's ears tingle. Maybe she didn't have the good sense to watch where she was wading. But a man could change that in a woman, once he'd got her, and even Lola couldn't raise a hell of a lot of devilry in a week.

He felt better after he'd planned it all out—the Narrows, then the foot of the pass, then North Park. There was methodism in Steve which made planning important. Like the planning he'd made for the post at La Porte and Lola Mantel and himself. He liked to know where he was going and what trail he was following and how soon he'd get to his destination. Saved a sight of drift and backtracking.

Steve plowed up the Poudre, astonished to find that the turbulent stream was completely iced over. He staggered on glare ice, fell twice when a gust of the gale dipped into the canyon with sledging force.

But the mountains didn't know of his plan. He was three hours short of the Narrows when the high peaks shook the storm down.

Hands and feet pained sharply with the cold. Steve burned much precious energy beating them against his body and stamping on the treacherous footing to keep his thickening blood circulation moving through them. The blood in his head seemed to be thickening, too, for perceptions dulled.

In half an hour his body was aching in a dozen raw places and he could not tell whether they were bruises suffered in repeated falls, or whether the wind was hitting him so hard that it bruised his body in itself. So much hard, dry loose stuff was flying from hummocked drifts that his face was cut and raw and he could see little of the canyon walls on either side. He could not mark his passage. He was not sure even that he was making progress.

It was with gratitude that he felt the wind ease a little and a feeling of warmth become appreciable in the air. He knew what it meant. The wind had brought the snow down from the summit of the peaks.

The canyon was a funnel through which a white hell poured. When the funnel was at its narrowest point and the wind and the howling drift were a wall against which Steve leaned savagely to gain a foot, an instinct beyond conscious thought turned him a little aside.

He clawed slowly and blindly over an unseen heap of driftwood into a dark place in the canyon wall, where the wind did not reach, but which reverberated sullenly with the thunder of the white maelstrom rushing past outside. Steve St. John lay on his belly on the iced floor of the cave in the Narrows, fighting grimly for half an hour with stiffened fingers and exhaustion and stubborn, precious sulphur matches before he had a fire.

He sat almost in the flames, risking swallowing smoke to breathe warmed air. And thought moved sluggishly through him.

I'm a crazy man. Crazier than the dead Arapahoe courier in the drift below Two-Mile Ford. Lola is in Denver City. And I'm fighting to get to North Park—with a letter to a woman I've never seen. He, the wild-eyed trader who thinks a stranger's letter is more important than his own life or getting himself a woman!

STEVE boiled snow water and made quantities of hot, thin broth by adding a handful of thinly sliced frozen venison from his pack. He swore at himself while he rested, watching the flames of his fire rapidly eat up what driftwood he could reach. But when the wood was gone, he shouldered his pack again. That damned letter was still in his pocket and North Park, Rosemary Darniel were still over the summit.

The Poudre threaded a long series of meadows above the Narrows. Going was easier, here, since the wind had had more room in which to work and the drift had been swept up from the valley floor to cling in great dunes to the high, sloping ridges above the river. Sawtooth Mountain and Old Baldy began to materialize, towering like optical illusions above the lesser ranges. Steve fixed his eyes on the saddle between the two great peaks. Cameron's pass lay in that saddle. Beyond it lay the Park.

As the country became higher, Steve

St. John felt a peculiar sensation creep over him. He began to feel that he was moving in an unreal world, a world which didn't exist. He was a mountain man—practical. He clutched grimly at the causes for this. First the cold, then the altitude. What air he got froze his lungs, and there wasn't enough of it. The result was a kind of drunkenness.

But mostly the cause of his sensation was the storm. There was no movement anywhere except that caused by dying eddies of the wind. There was no life. Only snow and ice, silence and motionlessness, and the mountains. And cold which increased as the air cleared, so that it became a burden across his shoulders and an invisible barricade against which he had to thrust at every step.

Even when the sun came out there was no letup in the cold. Steve pulled a leather mask from his pocket and tied it across his face, a mask with two tiny slits over the eyes to filter out some of the sunlight glare. But in minutes, condensation of his breath cemented it to his cheek ridges and the bridge of his nose with a thick coating of ice.

Lethargy increased in Steve with the increasing altitude and the continued pact of the cold. He fought it desperately, running back in his mind over the high country stories he had heard. Who had crossed the big mountains in midwinter—plowing toward the summits in the face of a midwinter blizzard? Where—Love-land . Pass—Monarch—Midland? Did even the hardest of the mountain men know what the big peaks were like in this kind of weather?

He couldn't remember if he had heard of such a crossing. And he tried to think that he was doing something more now than foolishly attempting to deliver a letter which should have been routed through La Porte in the first place.

His strides were growing imperceptibly shorter. The exhaustion in his body was mounting, creeping into every muscle. Other men had felt this cold and had seen this emptiness and had been afraid of it.

And like those others before him, he was going to collapse. Somewhere soon the cold would crush him, toppling him into the snow. He hadn't heard about other high crossings like this because those

who had tried them had not come back to tell of what they had seen—of the strange, woolly suffering-without-pain which they had endured.

Steve counted his steps automatically, and over them he tried to force further thought into his mind. While his mind was working, his body would continue to function. When he quit thinking, everything would quit. The cold would win.

He thought about Rosemary Darniel. A woman who could make the barest cabin comfortable, he was sure. A woman wise enough not to ask too much from either God or man. Whatever was in this letter for her—however important it might be—she would have already realized that the mountains and the storms would keep it from her. If it was medicine she would have already tried to do with herbs—or if it was too late, she would be about her duties in her cabin, nursing another of the sorrows which made life on the high frontier a grim task for most women.

Maybe some day the letter in his pocket would reach the woman, Steve thought. In the spring someone might find it and carry it on. If they did, the story of how it had started up the Poudre from La Porte would go with it and that story would make the woman feel better. It would lessen her sorrow, if she was sorrowful. It made a woman feel good to know a man had tried the impossible for her, a settler's wife in a remote cabin.

Hell, he was delivering that letter—not somebody in the spring. He was delivering that letter and getting to hell back over the mountains and back down to Denver City before Lola Mantel made a fool of him and ran off with some gambler or mule-string driver!

Steve brought his head up, too, shaking it savagely. Something had changed. Not the sun, except that it had moved far across the sky. Not the mountains, except that they had shifted position. Not the cold, for it was still merciless.

But his footing had changed. He was no longer pulling laboriously up the interminable slopes. The tempo of his stride had lifted. He was travelling more lightly. He was moving down grade. Dazedly he realized that he had crossed Cameron's Pass. He was over the summit of the Medicine Bows. He was into North Park.

And somehow he was still on his feet. Suddenly he knew he had to last through. He had to reach a cabin. He had to reach ears which would listen. He had to tell somebody what he had done.

HE heard voices. He smelled smoke. His eyes swept the slopes before him, but he could see no cabin, no clearing, no moving figures. Only vast expanses of wind-drifted snow and towering, glitteringly brilliant distant peaks, and ice—from all of which light reflected in slanting, painful needles. His head felt swollen, oversize. The sockets of his eyes were granulated, tight, and on fire. His leather mask was useless. He tore it off.

This was snowblindness. He was seeing nothing. The ice and the slopes and the mountains were merely impressions left on his mind earlier. All that was real before his eyes were the lances of light which tore at them. He stumbled on, moving toward the sounds he heard and the things he smelled.

After a long time, a desperately long time, he heard a man's voice close at hand: "Good Lord!"

He felt a man's hand on his shoulder; he felt a strong arm slide across his chest.

"Good Lord, I believe he's come over the pass!" the voice said again.

Darkness hovered over Steve, threatening to smother out even the needling sunlight against his eyes. He was aware he was being led across the snow. After a little he sensed a doorway and the relief of the gloom within some kind of shelter. He smelled food. He felt warmth. And he knew busy hands were attending to him. He tried to reach the pocket where the letter for Rosemary Darniel reposed, but strength ran out of him.

During long hours which followed, Steve St. John was occasionally aware of movement about him. Twice he was fed and knew it. He slept often, with the complete surrender of exhaustion. And slowly the torment pressing against his eyes eased.

He did not know how long it had been since he was led in from the trail, when he sat slowly up. His eyes were not wholly in focus yet, but he saw he was inside a comfortable cabin. A man was drying

the barrel of a rifle which had apparently been brought in from the cold outside and left by the fireplace until it had warmed and moisture had condensed on it. The man leaped up when Steve roused.

"All right, boy?" he asked anxiously. "All right?"

Steve nodded.

"You squeezed in pretty close," the man said. He was a big man, grizzled, with graying hair and beard and kindly eyes set in a deep net of sun-wrinkles. "You're going to think I'm crazy," he went on, "but did you come in over the pass?"

Steve nodded. "By way of the Poudre Canyon—from my post at La Porte."

"Then you're St. John, the trader that's been wintering there?"

Steve nodded again.

The big man shook his head. "That took gut enough and was plenty appreciated by us up in here, as well as those on your slope of the hills. But you're the one that's crazy. What could bring you in here with a blizzard?"

Steve pawed at the flap of his pouch. "Darniel's—where's Darniel's place?" he asked.

"I'm Darniel," the big man said.

"Your wife," Steve said. "I've got something for your wife—"

"Wife?" Darniel asked blankly. "Son, Mary's been dead for six years."

"Mary?" Steve looked about helplessly. "Mary—I've got a letter here for Rose—Rosemary Darniel. Came to La Porte for me to forward when Laramie and Fort Bridger couldn't get it into the Park."

The big man's frown faded. He took the letter and stared at it. He looked a long time at Steve, then turned slowly.

"Rose—" he called. "Rose, come in here. A letter for you."

A skin hanging covered the doorway to the other room. This flew back. A girl ran in. A young girl, with the color of high air in her cheeks and the freshness of mountain water in her eyes and the strength of good timber in her graceful body. Her father handed her the letter.

"Mister St. John brought it up from La Porte for you—" he said.

The girl's eyes widened.

"From La Porte—on the Poudre?" she breathed in amazement. Then, bending

(Please continue on page 98)

With a diplomat's tact and a pioneer's guts, Ranger Jones set out to win—

LAW FOR THE LONE STAR

By PETER MacCORMACK



NOT SO well known but perhaps the greatest of all the Texas Rangers' great leaders was Major John B. Jones, the man who organized it and led it during its period of brightest glory.

In the hectic years following the close of the Civil War, Indian depredations along the frontier in Texas reached unprecedented heights. The Texas legislature, in 1874, authorized organization of a special frontier battalion to be comprised of six companies of seventy-five men under the leadership of a major.

Governor Richard Coke could not have made a wiser choice when he turned to the slight, quiet-spoken horse rancher of Navarro County to organize and lead the Frontier Battalion.

Born in Fairfield District, South Carolina in 1834, John B. Jones was then forty years of age. He was a handsome man, dark, thin, with piercing black eyes in an olive-skinned face. He stood five eight, carried himself with firm dignity. He was an expert shot and an excellent horseman whose mounts were usually magnificent bay stallions.

Many things contributed to Major Jones' wide success. Chief among them were a keen intelligence, a strong belief in the value of planning and of substituting brains for bullets wherever possible; a compelling personality; level-headed courage, and a fine sense of tact.

Tact was probably his greatest attribute. It helped him capture many a prisoner without use of a gun. Throughout his seven-year career with the Texas Rangers, he captured many prisoners, without once spilling blood.

Less than two months after he'd accepted Governor Coke's commission, Major Jones had the Frontier Battalion fully organized and manned.

He stationed his six companies, A to F, at wide intervals along the frontier. Couriers kept a communications tie between the stations. With his own patrol

Major Jones paid periodic visits to each company. He received and digested information, mapped out campaigns, and planned defensive and offensive moves against the Indians. He was more than a commander—he was a clever general.

In two years, after many minor and major brushes with the redskins, he'd eliminated the Indian menace on the Texas frontier. But his brilliant career had just begun.

He and his Frontier Battalion then turned their attention to the outlaws, who'd become almost as numerous and even more troublesome than the Indians.

Ironically, many of the outlaws he brought to justice won freedom through political conniving and legal technicalities and trickery. Undaunted, Major Jones then established a policy of gathering evidence weighty enough to convict before he brought his prisoners in. He often appeared in court to testify.

For five years he led his Frontier Battalion in a skillful, ruthless campaign against lawlessness on the Texas frontier. He had to cope with Mexican bandits on both sides of the border; stage, bank and train robbers; cattle rustlers; horse-thieves, and fugitives. Once he was handed a list of *three thousand* wanted men!

He stopped several bitter feuds that had exploded into bloody warfare. Sam Bass, the invincible train, stage and bank robber of Texas, finally reached the end of his career when he fell into the trap set by patient Major Jones.

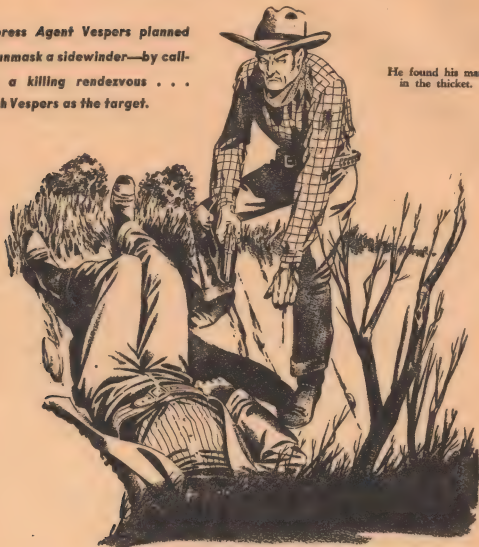
Major Jones died in 1881, the year when the last vestige of the frontier in Texas disappeared. The Frontier Battalion continued functioning for another twenty years. It had many great leaders, but not one who surpassed its organizer and first leader.

Texas will long remember its heroic Frontier Battalion and the slight, quiet-spoken horse rancher from Navarro County who led it so brilliantly.

NO CREAMPUFFS LIVE HERE!

Express Agent Vespers planned to unmask a sidewinder—by calling a killing rendezvous . . . with Vespers as the target.

He found his man in the thicket.



VESPERS stood back against the bar while the dancing smoke cleared away. The man on the floor was motionless. Dead, for Vespers never shot except to kill. A small, swarthy man with black hair and close-trimmed mustache, Vespers thoughtfully shoved his gun into holster.

The watchers, who had pressed the

walls when the trouble started, were in no hurry to stir. It was the third man Vespers had faced in this Golden Wheel saloon, a week apart, each on a Saturday night. For two Saturday nights before that, they remembered, there had been

By GIFF CHESHIRE

sudden disaster here in Devil's Jaw.

They all knew it had been Titus Hipperson who had grabbed for his gun, just as Ash Edmark and Jesse Foiles had done previously. Each of the three had started the fight, afraid of Vespers, enraged by him and the few words he spoke each time.

There was running on the street, boots pounding the plank walks of the mining camp. According to pattern, Vespers waited for Sid Ellwanger, the tough town marshal, to show up. It was only minutes until Ellwanger's huge bulk shoved roughly through the batwings. He stumped across the puncheon floor toward Vespers. His gaze dropped to the still figure.

For two months Vespers had been express agent here. The watchers were behind him. They were glad to see Titus Hipperson sprawled there. The man had been a bully, a sneak, and probably worse. So had his cronies, Edmark and Foiles. The marshal had done little to restrain them.

Sid Ellwanger fiddled with his marshal's shield, still scowling. His hand touched Vespers' elbow, and the pair turned toward the door. He wanted privacy. On the sidewalk he growled, "You're crowding these fights. When you know you can beat 'em, it's deliberate killing in my book!"

Vespers smiled. It was dark on the street and sticky with midsummer heat. "The camp would only break me out. And probably run you off your job."

"By damn!" blazed Ellwanger. "It's got to stop!"

"Did you run up those three for sticking up the express office?" Vespers' voice was deep but soft. "Did you find out who it was that fired a shot into my house and barely missed my wife?"

Ellwanger grumbled: "Damn it, Vespers, they left no sign behind 'em!"

"Then, since they aim to get me and my wife, I'm killing in self-defense." Vespers turned on down the street.

Ellwanger halted him. "You're killing on nothing but suspicions! Not that I don't think you're right, but that ain't a trial by jury. I reckon you aim to get the fourth man next Saturday night?"

Without answering, Vespers nodded

courteously and started on down the walk.

"Your luck can't hold forever!" called Ellwanger. "The next one might decide to jump first!"

Vespers kept on. His face sagged for the first time as he slipped a key into the lock of the express office. A light burned inside. He paused there. This was where it had happened, five weeks ago tonight. Each Saturday night when miners came in from the gulches there were pokes to be stored in the safe. It had been late, that particular night, and Vespers had drawn his blinds and was on the point of locking up. Three miners shoved in.

Edmark, Foiles and Hipperson. They had adjoining claims out in Dead Mule Gulch. Tough characters, heavy drinkers, trouble makers. Vespers had been on guard. Ash Edmark had a receipt for a poke he wanted to reclaim—an excuse to get him to open the safe, Vespers realized later. While he got the poke, Vespers had been wise enough to keep an eye on the three. But not yet wise enough to watch his back, which was toward the door to his quarters as he bent at the safe. Gratia had been in there.

All Vespers actually recalled was that something had cracked him hard across the back of his head. It had been odd that none of the trio beyond the counter had given a sign of what they saw coming. Later they had claimed the bandit had held a gun in each hand, freezing them.

But Vespers knew from long experience as a treasure guard, before he had married and turned agent, that there would have been some reaction he could have read. But they kept talking and laughing up to the last—making a covering racket.

Now squaring his thin shoulders, Vespers stepped through the door into his living quarters. Another lamp burned there. Uselessly. The girl seated in the rocker beside it didn't need light, anymore. She was very quiet, and her face was anxious. She was smaller still than Vespers, dark and beautiful even in her gravity. Vespers' jaw set sternly.

"I heard shooting, Anse," said Gratia, in a husky voice.

"Yes," said Vespers.

Gratia's small white hands stirred in her lap. "The third one, Anse? Please, let's just get away from here. That fourth

one—he'll kill you without warning."

The sternness was set in Vespers' face. "He'll kill *you* if I don't get him. He's already tried. You can't keep cooped up forever. We can't run from it. I've got to draw him into the open."

"Are you sure it isn't just your pride, Anse?"

Vespers was glad she couldn't see him wince. He felt his responsibility to the express company for the gold dust it had lost and wanted to retrieve. But it was a far greater matter than that.

He said, "You should be in bed, Gratia."

His wife rose with a sigh and stepped into the bedroom. Finding her own way, insisting on independence. Hot rebellion boiled up in Vespers. He fixed her bed on the sofa in the sitting room now. That was their secret, his strategy. He blew out the lamp and when Gratia returned in her nightgown he tucked her in. He felt strain in her as he kissed her. He saw that the rear and street doors were locked, then went out to the express office.

The fourth man, masked and in sock feet, had come through the quarters. Surprising Gratia, who had that day arrived in Devil's Jaw, and surprised by her, he had gun-whipped her into unconsciousness before she could recover from the shock and cry out. Gratia had a skull less thick than Vespers'. When she came to she had been blind. A blood clot, Doc Albee said, from the concussion and causing pressure on the optic nerve. Maybe her system would absorb it in time, maybe it wouldn't.

YET that wasn't what had caused Vespers to take the bogged-down law into his own hands. On the following Sunday night somebody had fired into the living room from the side street, missing Gratia, who sat in her rocker, by inches. Because word had spread around town that Doc Albee thought Gratia might recover her sight anytime, that she believed she could identify the bandit if she could see him again.

There was bitter irony in the fact that the trouble had started on Gratia's first evening in Devil's Jaw. That was why the bandit hadn't expected her to be there. When he had married her, Vespers had

asked to be taken off the dangerous work of guarding treasure and to be assigned to some way station. Not wanting to bring Gratia until he had determined what kind of camp it was, he had come on ahead.

Three weeks later Gratia had stepped off the stage, smiling, her warm brown eyes alive with the pleasure of surprising him. "I couldn't stand it," she had said. "I was afraid you were going to tell me I couldn't come. So I had to beat you to it."

"I was about to," Vespers had admitted. "It's a tough camp and no place for a woman."

"Going to send me away?" she had asked, slipping her hands under his arms. And Vespers had known that he wasn't. It being Saturday, he had been obliged to keep the office open late. Gratia had set about getting settled in her new home, unpacking her things in the bed room. She had been very quiet, and the kitchen had been dark when, for some reason, she stepped into it without carrying a lamp. She had stepped into disaster.

There was a knock on the express office door now and, frowning, Vespers went to answer it. Doctor Albee stepped in, his eyes grave. His brief stare told Vespers he had been called over to the Golden Wheel to take care of Hipperson. He was a large man, blond, with a square jaw and head. There was power in him, and the intelligence of a professional man. As Vespers softly closed the street door, Albee turned to face him.

"So you're still judge and jury and official executioner!" he exploded. "That fourth man—I suppose he comes next Saturday."

Vespers shrugged.

Albee's eyes were antagonistic. "I hope you don't go off half-cocked and kill an innocent man. Why don't you take Gratia away from here? Nobody'd blame you, if it's your pride that holds you here."

Vespers looked at him mildly. "Could you live with yourself if you simply ran away from trouble?"

"That fourth man will kill Gratia, if he can. And you, now that you've started this. He knows he's the only one left. It's satisfied your dramatic sense to make it a Saturday night, since your trouble came on Saturday nights."

"Saturday nights," Vespers pointed out, "were the only nights I could catch my men in town."

"Well, this man's going to be worried about the next one. He doesn't know but what Gratia's been able to tell you enough to lead to him. I've got a hunch he's in town all the time, Vespers. He'll get you, or her, before Saturday if he can."

"Yes," said Vespers.

With a gesture of hopelessness, Albee turned to the door and left. Vespers went to bed, spreading blankets on the floor against the wall close to the open outside window. It was his hope, his one chance to tempt the last man to declare himself. He dropped gun and belt by his pillow and stretched out. . . .

The week wore away, and a tense mood was on the town as it watched and waited. There *was* something that Gratia had been able to tell him, which had come to her later, and which Vespers had refrained from passing on after Ellwanger had thrown up his hands hopelessly. The sock-footed bandit had moved stiffly as he came across the dusky kitchen at her. Gratia had grown certain there was something odd that had registered even though she had been too astonished to scream.

Yet Vespers had been unable to spot any big man with a halting gait.

Though he rarely left the express office, on Friday morning Vespers crossed to the mercantile and purchased a box of .38 cartridges. He knew that word of it would spread rapidly.

Shortly after noon Bruno Albee came into the express office to see him, gruff as usual.

"Vespers," he said, "you've got to take

Gratia and go away. You're damned apt to leave her a widow."

"I'll stay," said Vespers. "My job's here."

"There's a brain surgeon in Chicago who might be able to help her. Why don't you find out?"

Vespers was staring at him. "Why haven't you told me that before?"

"Because I thought it might clear itself up," snapped Albee. "It'd be costly. If you're killed, what chance would she have of ever getting help like that?"

Vespers smiled. "So that's it. But if I don't work, what chance does she have? I didn't save my money before I was married, any more than any single man does out here."

Again Albee left, muttering to himself.

Sid Ellwanger came within an hour. The marshal bit the tip off a cigar and scowled at Vespers. "Vespers, I got a mind to lock you up for the week-end! You've built so damned much blind hate in you, you're going to kill somebody tomorrow night, guilty or innocent!"

"No," said Vespers. "It's not like that."

"And I won't stand for it!" the marshal resumed. "After this, your excuse of self-defense is out! If it happens again, you're the aggressor!"

For the first time the quiet courtesy left Vespers. "Considering it's a case of kill or be killed, I call it self defense!"

FRIDAY night, Vespers felt the strain in Gratia, and in himself. He carefully checked the doors before they retired that night. Again he spread his blankets close to the open bedroom win-

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UPSET
STOMACH

JUMPY
NERVES



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dow. Then long hours dragged past, and in spite of himself he grew sleepy.

He had no knowledge of the time when something awakened him. He had a vague feeling of dread as he lifted his head. Then all hell broke loose in the bedroom. It came from the window, two flashes of scarlet that bloomed in its pitch-black frame. He heard the slugs ripping into the mattress on the empty bed. He shoved up, his fingers closing on the grips of the gun. Then he heard sounds of the gunman lunging away.

He heard Gratia's cry of terror and reassured her. He shoved up the window. He heard heavy running steps diminishing in the distance. There was no moon, and it was pitch black outside. There was nothing to fire at.

But he had something to go on now. Beside himself there was only one man in this camp who had a legitimate reason to know where the bed was located—Bruno Albee, who had called professionally many times. And the gunman had sent his slugs into the bed without hesitation.

Vespers heard sound on the street side. The shooting had attracted notice in the all-night deadfalls. People were coming out to investigate. Vespers didn't want to be delayed by them. He had slept with his clothes on, and now he pulled on his boots, buckled on his gun belt. He closed the bedroom window and locked it. He knew that Gratia would only implore him to give it up, so he slipped swiftly through the living room. He let himself out the kitchen door, locking it behind him.

Vespers was glad of the masking mantle of blackness, for it concealed his own movements. He dropped down to the gully and followed its steep slope to the creek. Turning left, he proceeded to the bridge that led across. The rough road was scarcely more than a wheeled-out trail, leading to Dead Mule Gulch. Albee's cabin was on this road, with no close neighbors. Presently Vespers could see its dark outlines ahead in the blackness.

Vespers crossed the yard and stepped onto the porch, making no effort to soften his footfalls. He reached the door and struck it loudly with his knuckles. For a long while there was no response. He kept pounding.

Then there was a flickering light as a match was struck inside. Presently Albee came to the door, carrying a lamp. He stared at Vespers. He was stripped except for trousers, which he appeared to have just pulled on, and his bare feet were shoved into carpet slippers.

"What's wrong?" he asked crossly.

Vespers stepped inside and pushed the door shut. Albee shrugged and turned, carrying the lamp into the sitting room. Vespers stared. The man limped a little!

"Doc," said Vespers, "get your gun. If you can't show me a clean, cold barrel—I'm going to kill you."

Albee's eyes were impassive. "So you've gone completely mad."

"Get your gun."

"I have no gun, nor would I fetch it if I did. What brings you here, Vespers?"

"You heard no shooting?"

"I've been asleep. Do you mean you've drilled your fourth victim?"

"Gratia's never seen you," said Vespers, "and she never heard the bandit's voice. There've been several things to make me wonder about you, but I didn't know you limped till just now."

"What's that got to do with it?"

"The man who attacked Gratia was a big man who limped with his boots off."

Albee smiled, seeming to ease. "I hope I can show you what a fool you're being. What makes you think I'm the only man in camp with foot trouble? I can show you another, as big as I am and as stringhalted. Sid Ellwanger. I got him arch braces like I use."

"A man," said Vespers, "shot into our bedroom tonight and knew exactly where the bed stood. You're the only man that's been in that bedroom since I moved in."

Albee still seemed amused. "You put it in the one good spot in the bedroom. People lived there before you did, you know. It's not unlikely that Ellwanger has been back there. Why don't you go gunning for him, Vespers?"

In spite of his feeling that Albee was doing some fast maneuvering, the cold fingers of constraint closed on Vespers.

"You didn't tell me a specialist might be able to do something for Gratia," he said patiently, "until you saw it might cause me to take her and leave here."

"According to what Sid Ellwanger tells

me, he's done everything in his power to call you off your mad course, too. He'll probably give you a fight, if you insist on it. I won't. If you still want to kill me, it'll have to be in cold blood."

Vespers sighed and turned away.

He paused on the steps, sucking in a long breath. The light went out indoors as Albee disdainfully returned to bed. Suddenly uncertainty had Vespers. Albee had at least demonstrated that a man could build suspicion in a number of directions.

Though he fought it, he found his mind now turning toward Sid Ellwanger. Vespers walked slowly down the road. He had never believed that Ellwanger had tried very hard to solve the stage-office hold-up. No wonder, if he were in on it. . . . Vespers shook his head in self-reproof.

The road was deserted now, for the late hangers-on in the camp were those who played or drank through the night. Vespers paused on the bridge, staring down at the darkened creek.

Ellwanger. And tomorrow was Saturday. . . .

HE WAS turning into the gully that led to the rear of his place when flame tongued at him from across the creek. Something slammed him, and Vespers went down. He landed flat on his face and clawed around. Flame burst twice more in the blackness over there. Vespers showed to his feet. His left shoulder and arm were numb, but he could feel the warm trickle of blood down his side.

He lunged toward the creek and crossed it. He heard crashing in the brush.

It could be Albee, not wanting to return directly to his cabin. It could be Sid Ellwanger, aware that Vespers was visiting Albee and laying in wait. Or it could be anybody.

The gulch fanned out into a larger ravine. Sound told Vespers his man had cut left. He followed. His shoulder was beginning to thaw, the pain shooting the length of his arm. He knew he was bleeding heavily.

He kept going until he struck the trail where, undecided again, he paused. There was no noise at all now. Had the man turned toward Dead Mule Gulch or back to camp or stopped? Vespers made his

decision quickly and started toward camp.

Uproar came at him from above the trail. Vespers drove for the brushy, lower side. The man emptied his gun in desperation. Vespers bracketed him, above and below and to either side. He drove his last shot into the center of this frame and waited, reloading hastily.

It remained quiet over there. Vespers sent in a couple of test shots and got no response. Finally he crossed the trail. He found his man in the thicket above.

It was Bruno Albee. But the man was not dead, for Vespers found a faint pulse. The side of Albee's head was bloody. Vespers took the gun from the man's relaxed fingers and sat down to wait, wondering if Albee would die in silence.

It seemed hours before he realized Albee was trying to move. Vespers waited and then Albee whispered, "Vespers?"

"Yes."

"I knew I'd have to kill you soon. I didn't dare tackle it when you tried to challenge me. I'm not a good shot. . . ."

"The gold dust?" asked Vespers.

"My place. Edmark—Foiles—Hipperston—their share, too. We hadn't split it, yet."

"Gratia?" asked Vespers, and his throat was dry.

"Fine girl, Vespers. Hated what I did. Take her to a brain surgeon. He can give her back her sight. I could've, but I didn't dare. . . ." The weak voice trailed off.

Vespers climbed to his feet, an enormous weight lifted from his shoulders. He met Marshal Ellwanger and some others coming out from camp.

"So you're on your final rampage, Vespers!" roared Ellwanger. But his voice trailed off in a chuckle. "From what we heard and your wife said, there's no question your man carried the scrap to you this time. Who was it?"

"Albee," said Vespers. "He's back up the trail a piece."

They rode on, and Vespers resumed his staggering walk to camp. It all was evaporating like a bad dream, and his mind ranged ahead to getting the proper care for Gratia. She would have it, and that was what mattered. He was smiling a little as he picked up the dim lights of camp, glittering against a breaking dawn.

TOO TOUGH TO TAKE



Three champions they were—the deadly bounty-hunter, the swaggering bronc-buster and the man-breaking senorita . . . whose smile turned the fiesta into a nightmare of cold hate and hot lead.

*Dramatic Novelette
of the Wild Southwest*

CHAPTER

1

Show-off Gunhawk

The Mexican soprano had been screeching for hours, it seemed to John Anable. He wondered irritably who had started the legend that Mexican music was soft and restful. This was crazy stuff, a rhythmic jigtime piece that worked on his overwrought nerve like dripping water. It was no more soothing to a man's



By
**JOHN JO
CARPENTER**



"I came up fast and let
him have it twice...."

mind than the white, fiery tequilla the Mexicans drank.

He could see the girl standing on one of the tables at the far end of the pepper grove, between the big house and the little adobe *cabañas* where the help lived. He turned his back on her with an impatient gesture, and as he moved, out of the corner of his eye he saw the other American get up from his table and come toward him.

John had come to Agnew Overham's California place because, he had been told, a good job awaited him there. The word came at a time when he wondered if there ever would be a job for him again—at least one where he could do his day's work and sleep nights and worry only about tomorrow's weather. His levis were worn thin, almost as thin as his nerves. He could reach his hand into his pocket and rub a Mexican peso against a red American cent; he had a half-box of .45 cartridges left, and a gun and a horse and a seedy saddle: beyond that he was naked-broke.

The other American came up and touched his shoulder and said, "You never drank tequilla before?"

John said shortly, "Sure I have. Why?"

He took a good look at the other man then. He was burly of build, with powerful, draft-horse shoulders and thick legs. He was about thirty-five. Some years back his nose had been pushed a little to the left, and there was a short scar under his left cheekbone. He looked born to fight, born to like to fight.

"Why?" John repeated.

The man hitched at his pants and said, "I see you make a motion like you didn't like the lady's singing. So I reckoned you was drunk. I don't know of no other excuse for insulting the lady!"

"Is she your lady?" John said quietly.

He let his hand drop down to his belt. He edged the bench back a little so he could get to his feet in a hurry, and looked up at the burly one.

"Is she your lady?" he repeated, and when he got no answer he rapped out, "Go tell Overham I'm not waiting any longer. If he wants to see me, he'll have to hurry."

The big man's belligerence vanished. He looked his amazement.

"Say—you must be John Anable!" he exclaimed. "Lord—I didn't mean no offense—I reckon you know that, don't you? I—I'm Trailer Lewis."

He put out his hand, and John shook it. He had never heard of Trailer Lewis, although Lewis plainly expected to be recognized. For his own part, John was tired of it. He said:

"Sit down, Lewis. Do you work for Overham?"

"Me? No, I came here same as you." Lewis looked furtively at John's blue-black gun. He could not resist going on, "Is that the gun you broke up the Stevens gang with?" John nodded, and Lewis went on, "Always wanted to meet you, Anable. You remember Joe Sorrell, the kid that was lookout for the Stevens gang? I went to primary school with him, back in Missouri. He was born to hang, Joe was. I remember—"

"He didn't hang," John interrupted nervously. "He was in the pen, the last I heard."

Lewis guffawed. He seemed to have lost his anger altogether, and was genuinely pleased to be on these terms with John Anable. *The great John Anable, John thought bitterly; the boy wonder lawman, gun-notched at seventeen.* He tried to listen civilly to Lewis, but he was tautly nervous and shaky with hunger, and talk grated.

The girl stopped singing and jumped down from the table into someone's arms. Lewis got up abruptly, a rapt look on his face.

"I'll go find Overham," he said. "He's kept me waiting long enough, too."

He started toward the girl; going after Overham was only an excuse to go near her. She saw him coming and went in the other direction. Lewis's shoulder slumped, and he veered off toward the big adobe house hidden in the other edge of the pepper grove.

A fat Mexican came up with a stone bottle and a glass, and said, "A drink, *Señor*? You have been neglected."

John shook his head at the Mexican and watched the girl come toward him. He understood, then, why Lewis had been so stricken with her that he was ready to fight a stranger who did not like her music. She had seen John, too, sitting

alone at his bench and table, and was coming toward him with brazen curiosity.

There had been no time for women in John Anable's life so far. He had started hunting bad men (that was one way of putting it!) at sixteen. He was twenty-two now, and sometime in the last six or eight months he had looked at his life and thought, *It's no good; I'd be better off riding for somebody at thirty a month.*

He could not look back and put his finger on a single moment when things started going bad. He had been carrying it in the back of his mind a long, long time before it bubbled darkly to the surface of his thoughts.

THIRTY a month? He did not know whether it was six or eight months he had been hunting that kind of a job. A hundred times he had had men say, "Anable? Anable? Did you say John Anable? Well, now, I don't know as I've got anything in *your* line, Mr. Anable. Did you try someplace or other?"

They all knew of him. They knew he got a four thousand dollar reward for breaking up the Stevens gang, and another twenty-five hundred from the Sacramento Valley Banker's League. When a man like that wanted to work for thirty a month, something must be wrong.

The girl came toward him, smiling, walking slowly, and his palms started to sweat. She was small; a system of delightful curvatures delightfully linked together, with a tiny, triangular tawny face and the biggest eyes he had ever seen.

He forgot he had thought her voice screechy. He forgot that she had any voice at all. She just smashed him with that lingering smile and walked on past him, and he sat down again and watched her triumphant procession into the nearest *caboña*. She lifted the curtain and went inside without a backward look.

He heard someone come up behind him. He turned and saw Trailer Lewis and a big, portly, gray-haired man with pale blue eyes and a limp white mustche.

Lewis said, "This is Anable, Mr. Overham. He was just about to ride off on you." His tone was respectful.

John stood up to take Overham's hand. "Sorry as the devil about this, Anable," Overham said. He waved his arm. "This

is *fiesta* time, you know. You should have made yourself right at home, boy. We don't stand on ceremony here." He caught John by the arm and led him firmly toward the big house. "Come inside and have a drink to square things."

John went along, and he let Overham hold his arm because he knew if he tried to take it away he would do so violently. He kept control of himself until they reached the gate, and Overham let go just in time as a good-looking, middle-aged Mexican rode up on a handsome horse. He asked if he could spear to Senor Overham about the cypress tanks.

Overham told him, "Use your own judgment, Juan. Put 'em where they'll do the most good—that's all." Juan nodded and rode away and Lewis looked after him admiringly.

"Now there's a fine horse!"

Overham nodded.

"Juan rides his pick. He's general manager here."

They went into a big, dark, cool living room, and from it to Overham's adjoining office, an even bigger room with a roll-top desk and a big walnut table on which set a square bottle of Irish whiskey and six glasses. "Drink? Could either of you eat a bit?"

John could not risk picking up the glass of whiskey. He clenched his fist and said, "I could eat the skirts off of a Cherokee's saddle. I haven't had a bite since day before yesterday sometime." He licked his lips and laughed a little grimly inside at Overham's shocked expression.

"Thunderation! Why didn't you say something. Teodora!" A Mexican servant ran in, and he gave orders for food. They sat down, and John drank his whiskey sparingly. Overham marvelled, "You're not broke? Thunderation, how does that happen!"

"I ran out of money," John said. The food came, and he began eating. "That's how people generally go broke."

"But—it's funny to think of a man like you being broke."

"Being broke is never funny."

"I don't mean that. You're the kind of man we think of as being able to—well, take care of himself."

John laughed and said, "What's your proposition?"

Overham said, "Gentlemen, my son is coming home tomorrow. He's been with his mother in the east for three and a half years—my wife and I are separated. He—he thought he should be with her, but he's coming home. Gentlemen, I'm throwing the biggest damn' fiesta in the history of California. That's why I want you. I want the best."

Lewis leaned across the table.

"I want forty dollars a day. I'm the best trick rider in the world. If I can't get that I don't ride." He pounded the table. "Ask them up in Monterey whether it's worth forty dollars, the show I give!"

"I'll give you three hundred for four days," Overham said, and Trailer's chin dropped and he sagged in his chair. "I'll give you the same, Anable."

"Me?" John said. "What can I do for three hundred a week?"

"You're John Anable," Overham said simply.

JOHN laid down his fork and put his hands in his lap. He felt his temperish, nervous excitement rising again. He said a little thickly:

"Lewis has got something to show a crowd. What can I do for three hundred a week? All right, so I've made ten times that in a week. But it's not enough for what I used to do and too much for anything I'll do now." Sentences came to his mind, but he would not bother to explain: *I'm used to be gawked at by now, but not for money.*

"Show them how you did it, Anable."

"But I don't do trick shots." John shook his head as Overham tried to interrupt. "I guess you're one of those people who think a peace officer can do tricks with his gun. It's not that way."

"Listen! I joined the Army at sixteen—learned to use a gun there. Look at my hands: Long fingers, strong ones, steady ones. When my hands take hold of a gun, it does what I want it to do. But—I don't do trick shooting!"

"In the Army we hunted 'Pache renegades. My troop brought in two or three bunches, and I had some luck, and the captain took a fancy to me. Why?" He leaned across the table and grinned. "He needed something to write about to make

those two or three captures look good, so he wrote about me."

"That's not the way I heard it," Lewis growled.

John paid no attention to him.

"The captain retired and went to the Texas Rangers, and he arranged for a discharge for me so I could help them hunt down the Hyde brothers. You see, he believed it by then, what he had written about me! That's the way a man fools himself. . . .

"I brought in the Hydes in three weeks. You have that kind of success when you're young and brash and brainless, and your star is up. Then I went up to Idaho for some cattlemen, and then to Montana, and—well, it's been one job after another since then."

"But I never have done trick shooting, and I'm not a trained bear, Overham. What can I do that's worth three hundred dollars?"

Overham said, "Show them how you did it. Tomorrow, when my son gets here, suppose you show us how you got the Hyde boys. Show us the quick draw. Show us all—"

John found himself on his feet, hands clenched. He started to mutter, "Can't you understand that nobody's going to exhibit me on a rope for—"

The heavy front door slammed back and the girl came in from the living room. Her big eyes were snapping haughtily. She swept in and screamed at Overham:

"So! So! I've got to sleep in a shanty, eh? Dress there—yes! But I *will not* sleep there. If I am not a guest, I go home."

"All right, Luisa," Overham said. "Tell Teodora. She'll find you a room. No slight was intended, I'm sure."

Luisa's big, velvety eyes softened, and she gave John a snappy look, and then Lewis, before looking back at Overham. John understood then that this tantrum had been staged to show him and Lewis that she, too, was a *fiesta* star. She had been perfectly content to sleep in a *cabaña* until, somehow, she had heard that they were to be treated as guests.

"Thank you, Señor," she said. "I shall move at once."

She went out demurely. Overham

turned and grinned genially at them.

"Temperament, hey? She was born on the place—she's one of the Palomares tribe. She has got a little reputation in the Coast cities, but I never thought she'd do this. You two will have to bunk together now. You won't mind?"

John heard himself saying, "All right, Overham, I'll play gunman for you. But I don't know why." He was still watching the door through which Luisa Palomares had gone, and wishing he had not run through his money so fast. Just a few hundred dollars, to put earrings in those tiny ears. . . .

Overham poured another drink and John said, "To your son! By the way, what's his name?"

Overham said, "He's called Mark, after my father."

They drank, but Trailer Lewis was thinking of the girl, too, and he lacked John's sudden lightness of heart. He would not meet their eyes as they drank.

CHAPTER*Fiesta Fever*

2

Their room was big and cool and comfortable, with a wide bed near a window that looked out on the grove. John went to bed early, because he was curiously light-hearted, and he had been made aware at supper that Luisa expected him to stay and hear her sing again that night. He could not keep his eyes off her face, but he had made up his mind to stay away.

Lewis was out there somewhere with the crowd. There were at least three hundred Mexicans celebrating in the grove, around a dozen big fires. Some of them, he learned from snatches of overheard conversation, had come from forty miles away to help Agnew Overham welcome home his son. Yet all were Overham employees. The size of the property must be breath-taking.

He lay on his elbow and listened to Luisa. He was sure now that it was a bad voice. He could believe she was a star in the Coast cities, but it was her vibrant personality—and her brains—that made her that. Luisa was seventeen—nineteen—it was hard to tell. About the same age John was when he was cutting that first glorious swath across the law-

legends of the west. *She'll need luck, same as I did*, he thought.

Trailer Lewis came in and sat down heavily on the bed, and in a moment he whispered, "Are you awake, Anable?"

John said yes, and asked how the *fiesta* was going.

Lewis muttered, "I can't make out much of that Spanish lingo, and there wasn't nothing to drink." He went to the window and looked out on the moon-washed grove. Suddenly he began calling someone names, swearing viciously in a low voice, and John knew he meant it for Luisa.

"You shouldn't have tagged her out there tonight," he said. "That was just what she wanted, Lewis."

Lewis turned around slowly, clenching his fists.

"What who wanted?"

"The girl. Give her the absent treatment, like I did." He realized his voice was somewhat taunting, although he did not mean it that way. He had forgotten Luisa's face, her charm, her appeal for the moment, and he sympathized with Lewis. The big man was slow-witted but he meant well, and he was suffering. "Why don't you treat her like you would a horse? You don't let a young colt have his way, do you?"

Lewis looked quickly around the room and did not see John's gun and belt. He came toward the bed with slow, deliberate steps.

"Stay away from her," he said thickly. "Don't talk to me that way no more. You don't scare me, Anable. We can get that straight right now. If I catch you around that girl, I'll break your back, and don't you pull no gun on me, because I'm not easy to scare."

He leaned over the bed, groping with his big hands. John turned around and put his feet against Trailer's stomach and shoved hard, and as the big man went backwards, John came out of bed and smashed into him.

Lewis hit the thick wall hard, and John came up under his half-paralyzed arms and turned his back and threw him down with a chancery. Lewis hit hard again, and a little startled exclamation came from the next room—Luisa's—as the chimney rattled in the dark lamp.

Lewis lay there in the patch of moonlight from the window, glaring upwards and rubbing his face. John said, "I don't use a gun to fight with, Lewis. We can get *that* straight, too."

Lewis suddenly laughed, and John gave him a hand up.

"Say, you're all right, Anable!" Lewis said admiringly. The sullen, disappointed anger had been all knocked out of him. "You handle yourself pretty good for a skinny guy."

He kicked off his boots and undressed slowly, chuckling good-humoredly at the force of the three knocks he had taken. As he came to bed he yawned and said, "Anable, I hope you ain't gone on that little cholo girl, because I sure am, and I wouldn't want to have no trouble with you. I ain't never been married. Have you?"

John said no, and Lewis went on, "I'm gettin' to where I can make pretty good money. I've thought mebbe I'd get me a crew and take a show east, mebbe to Europe. A girl like that would be right at home in a frontier show, wouldn't she? I sure hope you ain't gone on her, because Luisa means a lot to me, Anable."

John lied, "Me? No. Go to sleep," and soon they did. . . .

At breakfast, John again wondered at the girl's fine manners. Somewhere she had picked up a fine social education in a very short time; where, he surmised, would be an interesting story. She was perfectly at home at Overham's sumptuous table, which awed John a little. Poor Lewis, who would be perfectly at home on the hurricane deck of a horse, suffered horribly.

Overham dragged him out after breakfast to see the *fiesta* preparations, and Lewis tagged after Luisa. John could feel her eyes on his back as he went out. He knew almost nothing about girls and women, but he thought, *They can't be much different than men or dogs or horses, and the important thing is to make her respect me.*

A RIDER came in on a steaming horse and told Overham that his son was well on schedule. He was coming by carriage, and the rider had played out a

whole relay of horses to bring this simple word. John asked why he had not ridden ahead, instead of letting the rider come, and Overham said, "Why, it would spoil the people's fun! They want him to come riding in this way."

John still did not understand how a son worth all this celebration could take his time in a carriage.

Overham showed him a circular corral, a new one big enough for the entire crowd to find seats on its rails. "This is where you'll perform," he said.

For a moment John's resentment came back, and then it was followed by something even worse—a momentary flash of stage fright.

Someone called Overham away then. John went back to the big house, and as he stepped up on the *galeria* he heard Luisa's delighted voice through the open door.

"Senor Anable! Come see what I've done. Isn't it lovely?"

He went into the office. Teodora, the old Mexican housekeeper, was sulking in a corner, and in another was Lewis, with the identical expression.

Luisa had laid the table tastefully; it was just for a man who was greeting his beloved only son with no women around. The linen was slightly rusty-yellow. There were no flowers, but she had put an old stone mortar, of Indian manufacture, in the center of the table. It contained cigars. Beside it were three fine decanters, a dozen glasses, a silver water pitcher, and one spoon. Luisa's small, tawny hand moved the spoon slightly, and somehow it looked better.

She flashed her dark eyes up at John. He knew she was turning on all the brutal attraction she possessed with that glance and the smile that went with it, and still his stomach went hollow.

"Isn't it lovely?" she said again.

He nodded. "Looks pretty good, but how's the liquor?" He poured a drink from the brandy decanter and shook his head, ignoring Luisa's shocked expression, at the taste. "I'll still take whiskey," he said, and put the bottle down. She replaced it with a trace of anger, exactly where it had been before, and handed his glass to Teodora.

"Here. Make it shine again, please."

Teodora shook her head stubbornly and looked the other way. "Very well, I will," she said, and went out. Teodora said, "Hah!" and followed her, and Trailer Lewis made a lunge for the whiskey bottle. He tipped it up and gulped thirstily, and seemed to feel better. He was careful to replace it exactly where Luisa had put it. He sighed, and John saw his jaw muscles working.

"I'll be all right when I get a horse under me." He wiped his forehead with his sleeve. "All this fancy stuff rattles me. I reckon you feel right at home here."

John shrugged, remembering the simple glassware but the stately "drinking manners" of his father.

"Trailer, let's put it this way—a saloon is a place where they sell liquor, so any place there's liquor, it's a saloon. Only this one, they let ladies in, and they don't belong. If you let yourself get a little sore about that, you won't get rattled."

"Thanks," Lewis said.

Luisa came back in with the glass. She put it down and came to John and put out one of her slim little fingers, pointing at his gun. He doubled his middle back an inch to keep her from touching it.

"Why do you wear that thing, Senor Anable?" she said. "It is not very kind to the *hospedero*, to go armed in his house, eh?"

The finger moved a little farther, and he made himself smile casually.

"I'm getting paid good money to look dangerous, lady. *Don't put your hands on that gun!*" He pushed her hand back.

She looked up tantalizingly and said, "Why?"

He said, "Because you're just doing it to be smart, and if you get smart with me, I'll slap your pretty little mouth."

She put her hand on the gun, and he slapped her mouth lightly, playfully. Trailer Lewis took a step toward him, with an odd trembling on his lips, as though John had hit him.

Luisa laughed and linked her arm through John's and folded his hand over hers and led him toward the door to the *galeria*. She took him to a pair of willow chairs, and he waited for her to sit down, and was conscious of Lewis taking it all in from the door. Then Lewis vanished,

his footsteps dying toward the back of the house. Luisa smiled and leaned back in her chair.

"So you're John Anable." Her tone indicated he was supposed to reply, *And so you're Luisa Palomares*, but he only grunted, and hoped it sounded authentic.

"Well, well!" she went on, after a moment, "this is a funny place to find you, eh? I thought you were a famous sheriff. Again he knew he was supposed to pay tribute to *her*; he should have remarked that it was odd to find a great star like Luisa Palomares at a shindig like this.

He watched her and let her see him watching, and he wondered how a girl could learn so much, and become all that Luisa Palomares had become, in so few years. Mexican girls, it was said, matured young, but that did not explain it. Brains could; if a great intelligence happened to lie behind that lovely face, it could be done. . . .

"Roll me a cigarette, John," she said.

He handed her the makings and told her, "Roll your own."

She rolled a cigarette dexterously, and he handed her a match. She smoked a moment and then said, "How does it feel to kill people for money?"

He said, "Oh, it's one way of making a living," but he had trouble keeping his voice steady—she had hit one of his raw spots, the worst one.

She smoked some more, and shuddered, and met his eyes. "It's horrible to think of!"

He nodded and smiled with no particular mirth.

"It beats hell," he said, "what some people will do for money. Now tell me about yourself."

She got the dig. Her breath hissed a little.

"There is not much to tell. You don't want to listen, anyway." Suddenly she put her hand on his arm. "Aw, John, don't fight with me. You are the only person here I can have any fun with. Look—we are like each other, aren't we? The *fiesta*—you don't like fiestas, either. Let's talk."

WITHOUT waiting for an answer, she talked. Like Lewis, her ambition was to go east, and to Europe, and he won-

dered which one of them had thought of it first, and inspired the other. Little by little, because she was still young enough to talk too much, she told how she had arrived here. At fourteen she was dancing in her uncle's *cantina* in Los Angeles, and somehow the customers flocked in. The priest prevailed upon her uncle to send her back to the ranch, but then Overham got her a good place in a respectable San Francisco supper house.

She was smart, level-headed, ambitious. She was a flirt because that was part of the job; she flirted with him and Lewis because she had not learned it was unnecessary to flirt with everyone. He wondered what she was leaving out . . .

"In Europe now there is an Argentine dancer who dances before kings. You have not seen me dance. My dancing is better than my singing."

"I hope to Pete it is, for your sake," he said lazily.

Instantly he was ashamed, because he had hit her rawest spot, too. She knew she had very little talent, and she wanted to be good, and not just a girl getting by on her looks and power of attraction. She stared at him with blank, angry misery in her eyes, and he reached over and squeezed her round arm.

"Scuse it, kid," he said. "I forgot what it's like to be on your own at sixteen, in a man's world."

He began telling her about himself, to show her he wasn't proud of it. The words came slowly at first, but shortly the old feeling came back, for the first time in five or six years, and he could taste in his mouth the hunger for glory.

"Those Hydes, you understand, were bad medicine, really bad. There were four of them, brothers. My old Army captain was a Ranger lieutenant then, see, and they just had the Indian sign on him. He kind of dropped everything on me, tickled to death to find somebody ignorant enough to take it. . . ."

He told her how they had trailed the Hydes for a month, then trapped them in a thicket. Little by little it came back, sun and thirst and hunger and fierce excitement and all, as he told her how they had lain in cover for thirty-six hours, smoking to persuade their bellies not to be hungry.

"The Hydes figured we'd come in after them, but we didn't. I kept our boys under cover and waited for it to dawn on them that they'd have to come out or starve."

Charley, the one who killed the U. S. Marshal in Waxahatchie, came out first. He came out with his hands up and made a dive for a Ranger's gun when he got close enough, and they shot him full of holes.

"Dete—he was the eldest one—Dete came out with his hands up. They hanged him in Austin nine days later. Harve was next to Dete. He came out with his gun on the ready, on my side. I—it was the first man I ever killed."

"How many since?" she interrupted swiftly, pain in her eyes.

"Two."

He told how Clay, the young one, the mean one, stuck it out all that night and the next day.

"I did a fool thing then. I went in after him, on my belly. Four and a half hours, the lieutenant said I was gone before they heard the shooting. He heard me cough and made a quick turn, and that's when I spotted him. He had his gun in his hand then. We were about twelve feet apart, with this thick brush between us, and I was on my belly. I came up fast and let him have it twice."

"Where did he shoot?" she whispered.

"No place. He never got one off."

"He had his gun in his hand, and yet you shot first?" He started to explain, but she shook her head. "Is that really true? Then you must be awfully good—as good as they say you are."

He did not have to answer. A high, pealing yell came from the grove, and a *grulla* horse bucked out into view. Trailer Lewis was riding him, leaning back on the hackamore rope with one powerful arm and holding the other nonchalantly crooked at his side, fingers out. He was raking the horse fore and aft, but more terrifying to it were the frenzied yells of the Mexican hands who were streaming out behind.

The horse bucked straight toward them, and they saw the blood bubble out of Trailer's nose every time it hit the ground. The horse crashed into the white-washed hitch rail and squatted back,

stunned, and when Trailer shook the rope and raked it again, refused to buck.

Trailer got down and threw the rope to a Mexican and staggered toward them, wiping the blood off his mouth with his sleeve. He seemed to have trouble focusing his eyes on them.

"You gave him a ride," John said.

"I broke his heart." Trailer said it matter-of-factly, grinning a crooked, dizzy grin with his bloody mouth. He had felt the familiar pitching of a buck's hurricane desk, and was no longer shy and ill at ease.

He went unsteadily into the house, calling back over his shoulder, "You was right, Anable—a hundred per cent! Them fancy manners don't matter—it's still a saloon."

Luisa gave John a puzzled frown, but he did not explain. In a moment she said, "Jelly brains. They all get it, riding bad horses."

Her little hand came across between the two chairs, and he tried to keep his own away from it, and could not. He grasped it, muttering, "Other ways you get jelly brains, too, honey."

Suddenly she stood up, whimpering, and came toward him. He got up and put his arms around her and she clung to him, crying, "Anable, Anable, what happened to me?"

He kissed her and said, "You've got jelly brains, top, girl."

CHAPTER

3

How a Killer Kills

It would be years before the details of that morning would return to him. He could remember very little of it by the time noon came. He had a sense of jubilation; he wanted to show off, and go around with the girl on one arm, his other hand resting on the butt of the gun that had made him famous.

Being a "star," an expert, set one apart, but it was not necessarily unpleasant. It was lonely, and that's what had been eating him this last six or eight months. It was being stared at, the feeling of having men look up at him instead of straight across, at eye level; the sense of being cut off from his kind, penned up

like a pure-bred bull or an imported Irish stud.

But there were other stars set apart, too. Luisa was one of them. She, too, knew the feeling of being stared at and envied and hated, the sense that it was conquer or be conquered, kill or be killed, stick to the pinnacle or drop to the depths. John, at least, had been a man, and things were always easier for a man, in a rough, new country. He pitied Luisa, but he was proud of her, too; and if she was selfish and calculating and ambitious, he did not blame her.

Overham caught them sitting on the *galeria*. Their hands came apart, but he did not seem to notice. He looked disappointed and crestfallen.

"Thunderation! There was some kind of an accident with the carriage. It broke a reach, or something, and no telling when it will get in. Perhaps not before night." He looked at his big watch and rubbed the face pensively with his thumb. "Can't hold up the *fiesta*, though. Anable, will you find Lewis, and let's get started? Luisa, you'd better get ready, too." He sighed a disappointed sigh. "I'll tell them to dig up the barbecue."

"I had them start another one," Luisa said. "It will be ready by night."

"You did?" At first Overham seemed angry that she should take such responsibility. Then he brightened. "Now that's very thoughtful of you, Luisa. We'll just have two barbecues today, eh? One now, one when Mark gets here."

He went out toward the grove, feeling a little better, and John marveled at the kind of a man he was. Steers could be slaughtered and barbecued by the dozen, and he paid no more attention to the cost than to the cost of the tobacco he smoked. And yet a few hours delay in the arrival of his son spoiled his day. *What kind of a son is he—why doesn't he grab a horse and hightail it here?* John thought.

He had never seen such riding as Trailer Lewis showed them that afternoon. The man's tremendous strength made it look easy, yet when he hauled back on the hackamore rope and brutally turned a fighting bronc around in the middle of a buck, a gasp went around the corral.

With his own two horses, Shuffle, the cow-pony, and Painkiller, the "educated"

one, Trailer was gentleness itself. Like John Anable and Luisa Palomares, he was the best in his line. Unlike John and Luisa, he had no poise, but that would come. Only lately had he realized just how good he was, when he began to get forty dollars a performance. After this one, when three hundred dollars had been had for a single week, he would never shy away from fine glassware and fine manners again.

And then he would begin to be lonely, too.

Trailer's show lasted an hour and a half. It was blazing hot by then, and they were glad to go to the grove and eat. John drank too much tequilla and ice water, but while it went to his head it did not affect his gait or arm.

Luisa danced while they ate. She danced only for him, and he knew she was dancing as she had never danced before. But it was John, and not Luisa, who got the applause when she finished. The dance had some special significance, he realized; by it, she had picked him out publicly, announced their betrothal.

She jumped up on the table beside him and sat there, swinging her legs. They brought her the best tidbits to eat. She accepted them, and this honor, as though everything like this was due her, and John sat beside her on the bench, smoking and looking up at her and frankly enjoying it.

Trailer had disappeared. When he thought of it, this caused John a little uneasiness. He remembered the big man's warning of the night before, and his violent, unpredictable temper. But like the morning, the first part of the afternoon passed in a golden, glowing haze.

When the grove's shadow had moved out over the big corral, John led the crowd toward it, and their gawking did not annoy him. Luisa hung on his arm until he reached the gate. She tossed him a kiss and he stepped inside, and the Mexicans fought for places around the rails.

FOR a second his nerve deserted him. They had him completely surrounded, a rapt, tense, admiring sea of brown faces. At the bottom were the children, shoals of big, black eyes; he remembered that in Texas they said mothers scared their children with his name. (*If you're a bad*

boy John Anable will get you—he shoots bad people.)

Luisa was not the only pretty girl there. He saw eyes almost as big as hers, forms almost as perfect, faces almost as lovely. There were old men, young ones, old women, young matrons—all with the same intense interest. They were going to see how a killer killed.

For a second he revolted, he wanted to hunt up Agnew Overham and yell at him, "Who do you think you are? Can you buy me? Can you buy the inside of a man's soul, to show off to your people?" The old hate and disgust boiled over, and he was aware of his shabby, patched pants, his run-down boots, and the fact that ordinary men thought him a freak of some kind.

Then he caught a warm, laughing, prideful glance from Luisa, and he said to himself, *I guess it's no worse than facing the Hydes*. He forced a grin back, and licked his lips, and tried to remember how it had been.

The scene came back. He pointed with his finger.

"Now over there is a dry gulch about three feet deep and, say, eight feet wide. Beyond that is where the Rangers pull up. We send three men around this side, see, and five around the other way.

"That leaves the lieutenant and one man and myself over there in the wash. Every man's got a piece of bread or something, and plenty of tobacco and plenty of ammunition. Now inside here, all around, is this thicket—Devil's Thorn-patch, it was called. Now just imagine three-four hours are going by. . . ."

He had Charley come out and dive for a Ranger's gun because his own was empty, and so Charley Hyde was dead. There was not a sound from the rails as he showed them how Pete, the eldest one, came out with his hands up. His mouth got a little dry as he showed them how Harve came out. . . .

"I was set for him right here, see. I got him right here in the breast-bone."

Luisa had lost her smile. She was watching him almost hypnotically, and it made him swell a little, to know she had forgotten it was just a show. He slowed his story down a little, dragged it out to recall little insignificant incidents that

would heighten the excitement for them to something like the thing as it really had been.

He got down on his belly and inched across the corral as he had going into the *soto* after Clay Hyde. He remembered the spider web that had gotten across his face, and he stepped to spit it out and wipe his mouth, and everyone there knew how it would be to have to stop and spit out a spider web with Clay Hyde only a few yards ahead.

"He was standing sidewise to me, crouched down, listening. I had to cough—I'd gone too long without a cigarette, and my throat was tickling. He heard me and kind of turned around, as though he didn't believe his ears. I started up then, pulling my legs up under me, and he saw me. He had his gun, a Walker model Colt .44, in his right hand. He swivelled around and leaned back, and I came up hard like this. . . ."

He gathered his knees under him violently and came up, and his hand found his gun without effort and knocked it out of the holster. The way he drew, there was a second that he did not have a grip on his weapon. He hit it and knocked it out and caught it—a risky business, but fast if it worked.

A girl screamed, and he pumped a shot into the ground to show how he had knocked Clay Hyde down. Someone came lumbering across the arena toward him. It was Trailer Lewis, and he had a gun in his own hand. His mouth was twisted in a snarl, and he walked a little unsteadily, as though he had drunk too much.

John turned around a little to meet him, and slid his gun back into its holster. Lewis saw him do it. He stopped and licked his lips and holstered his own gun.

He blinked at John and said in a low voice, "I told you to stay away from her, didn't I, Anable?" His big shoulders bowed slightly, and his arms went out crookedly by his side, and he leaned forward on the balls of his feet.

Beyond him the corral rails were thick with people. John yelled over Trailer's head: "Get out of the way—get in the clear, you fools!" Nothing happened; they thought it was part of the show. He yelled again, and still they did not move.

Then Luisa screamed behind him, in Spanish, with a tone so urgent that they understood it if nothing else. The rails suddenly stood out behind Lewis empty and sharp like three lines drawn across the horizon.

He called over his shoulder to Luisa, and she answered him from somewhere else, and he knew she was out of range of the horseman's guns. He looked at Lewis and said:

"Don't be a damn fool, Trailer. This isn't your game. If you make a stab at that gun, I'll kill you." Lewis stared back at him, grinning, and John went on, "Don't make me do it, Trailer. Turn around and keep your hands away from your guns and start back toward that gate—"

Lewis took a step toward him and half whispered, "I said stay away from my girl. No ratty little gun-tough ever bluffed me yet. I whipped worse men than you many a time, Anable."

John said, "You asked for it, Trailer." He straightened up sharply, and Trailer misunderstood the motion and went for his gun. His big hand was steady and fast. He kicked his legs wide apart and pulled his torso into an arch and stabbed downward, and when he had his hand on the butt of the gun, John drew.

He knocked the gun out of the holster with that savage, risky blow and caught it, and felt it sock familiarly against the butt of his palm. His finger found the trigger and pulled it just as Trailer's gun cleared the holster at his side. His first shot missed, but it was so close it panicked Trailer for the split-second necessary, and with the second shot he knocked the gun spinning out of the big man's hand.

Trailer stood there with his big, empty hand clenching and opening, and a gray pallor coming across his face. John leaned back and pumped another slug into the ground behind Trailer, shooting between his legs.

John took a few steps toward him and said, "There's three more left in here, Trailer. You still think you can whip me?"

Trailer waited a minute with his mouth open. John took another step toward him, squinting a little, feeling nervousness take

hold of him. Trailer straightened up and made himself say:

"Well, go ahead, Anable. I never begged any man and I'm damned if I'll start with you."

JOHN holstered the gun and shook his head angrily. He went up to Trailer and took hold of his shoulder and shook him. "How does an idiot like you know enough to come in out of the rain, Trailer? I wouldn't be fool enough to ride the horses you ride—what makes you think you can beat me at my game?"

Trailer saw he wouldn't have to beg for his life then. The grayness left his face and he closed his eyes a minute in a deeply grateful sigh.

"I ain't beggin'," he reminded John.

John laughed and threw his arm around Trailer's shoulders. "Let 'em think it was part of the act. I'll be blasted if I'll ask any man to beg for his life—just to make Overham's hands happy."

They went over to Trailer's gun. Trailer picked it up and put it in the holster; he had to use both hands, because the reaction had set in, and he was weak and trembling. They went to the corral together, where Luisa was standing. Her mouth was working a little. She looked at John and said, "You fool, you fool, to take that chance, to try to shoot his gun!"

Trailer licked his lips and looked at her.

"I guess I ain't got much chance, have I, Luisa?" he said. Trailer managed a grin. "I was doin' all right, Anable, till you showed up. Well—good luck. I know when I'm licked."

"Go have yourself a good, stiff drink—and pour one for me," John said.

Trailer grinned and went toward the house, and Luisa leaned her head against John's chest a minute, not caring much who saw. John patted her head and kissed the top of it.

"I'd better go hoist one with him," he whispered. "He's quite a bit of a man, at that." He pulled away from her and walked off and left her standing, knowing she did not like it, knowing she never would like things like that.

He went into the house. Overham had poured a big hooker of whiskey for each of them.

"I saw your act," he said. "So that's

the way those historic things go?"

"Not quite," John grinned, picking up his drink. "We went away and left Clay alive. We'll finish him off tomorrow. Was it worth the price?"

"Marvelous!" said Overham, shaking his head. "You've got quite a knack for telling a story, too. I was watching most of it." There was a new look in his eyes, the look of a man who reached for a rabbit and found himself with a handful of panther. He would think twice, next time, before he tried to buy a man's secrets. John thought, *Why, maybe I'm the first man he ever really respected.*

"Have to hand it to you lawmen," Overham finished. "We never quite appreciate what we owe you, until some way it's brought home to us."

"I'm not a lawman," John said automatically.

Someone yelled outside—a man's voice, whooping at the top of a pair of strong lungs. Someone else took it up, and in a second the whole crowd of Mexicans was whooping.

Overham set down his glass and exclaimed, "Mark! My son! My son must be pulling in." He put down his glass and ran out.

John and Trailer drank theirs, and then Trailer reached over and picked up Overham's, downing it in a gulp.

"To Mark!" he said. "Mustn't waste this stuff."

They went outside. It was just starting to get dark, and it was hard to see details in the shadowy grove. They went toward it slowly, picking their way through the crowd to where the carriage had been stopped by it.

Mark Overham had come home in style. A dozen riders had accompanied him, on the best horses John had ever seen. But it was Mark Overham himself who surprised John.

He had expected a young man, but Mark was at least in his forties—a tall, brawny, dark man who would someday be portly, like his father. He had a big, black mustache and laughing black eyes, and he wore two hundred dollars' worth of clothing. John saw Overham go up to him as he stepped out of the carriage. They shook hands formally, and then Mark threw his arms around his father.

"Agnew Overham, you old devil, you look younger than when I left here, by all that's holy!"

Old Overham pulled away, happy beyond power of words, and said, "Cut it out, you big ape. I suppose you think I can't whip you any more?"

He introduced John and Trailer. Mark was easy to like, easy to respect. John understood many things now. Here was the kind of man who would remain east with his mother, not necessarily because he liked the east, but because she needed him. He would come home in this outlandish style, not because he liked it necessarily, but because it was expected of him—it would give the Overham hands a show and an excuse for a *fiesta*, his father happiness to stage it.

He had a knack of pleasing people, did Mark Overham; truly, no prince of the blood was ever better equipped to inherit such an empire. John liked him immediately.

Then Agnew Overham said, "Here's someone I'll bet you don't know, son," and Luisa Palomares came forward, holding her hand out. John disliked her manner as much as he liked young Overham. She was impressed, but she seemed to him to be playing up to him the wrong way.

Mark took her hand, holding it high, as though undecided whether to shake it or kiss it.

His father said, "Why this is the little Palomares girl, that you used to play house with, Mark," and Mark gave a yell and dropped her hand.

"And you think you're going to shake hands, you pretty little devil!"

He grabbed her and swung her off her feet and spun around twice with her, kissing her. He set her down and picked her up again and kissed her again, and Trailer twitched John's sleeve and whispered, "How about a drink, podner?"

They went to the house, stalking away from the gay crowd, and Trailer muttered scornfully, "Played house together, did they? He's at least twenty, twenty-two years older than her. Played house, did he? Who did the ropin' and brandin' whilst he was playin' house with the help's young 'uns?"

John had taken it for granted that the

girl was not more than sixteen or seventeen. His mind was whirling as they went into the coolness of the big house. He snapped at old Teodora, "How old is Luica?"

The woman answered, "Quien sabe? About *trienta*, Senor."

Thirty . . . thirty. . . . He could subtract at least five from that, but that left seven or eight years unaccounted for. She had slurred over them in telling him about herself, sensing how easily he could be fooled.

When she came in, between the two Overhams, with Juan Hernandez following, he looked keenly at her, and to save his soul he could find no evidence of those seven or eight years.

Then he had no doubt about her: she would never show her years, and how they were spent.

And this time it was Trailer Lewis who was perfectly at ease, while John Anable leaned stiffly against the table, clumsy with his hands and feet, and barely able to get out awkward words of apology when his black-buttèd gun scarred a deep scratch in the table.

CHAPTER*Manhunt*

4

He waited for her on the *galeria* after the sun went down. She came out at last, but she would not let him kiss her. He lost his temper and accused her of falling in love with a different man each day. She flared back. Then, to his surprise, she tried to explain.

"We are too much alike. We are hard as diamonds, John Anable, and we would cut each other like diamonds—first one, then the other. But I will think one more night about it. Now I have to go dance again."

With a quick change of mood, she grew flirtatious. She could not help it.

"Will you come watch me dance?"

He said thickly, "No. I'll wait here until your music is finished. Then I'll smoke one cigarette. If you're not here when it's finished, I'm coming after you."

She jerked away from him.

"You're coming after me? And do you think I'm a squaw, a slave for you to call to and fro?"

"I'll smoke one cigarette," he repeated, turning his back on her.

She waited a moment, genuinely scared. He went over to the chair she had occupied the day before, sat down, and threw his leg over the arm.

She went into the house and came out with her *baille* costume on—a rust-red velvet gown with a high collar but with no sleeves. She stopped beside him and whispered, "John," but he looked up without saying anything, and in a moment she turned and went toward the grove. Her steel-shod dancing heels clicked across the planks and she vanished into the shadows.

In a few seconds the yelling of the crowd died, and then he heard the guitarists trying their chords with slippery, limber fingers. By turning his head he could have seen them lift her up to the table where she would dance, but he would not.

The Overhams came out with Trailer Lewis; they had been having another sociable drink together. The Overhams started down toward the celebration, but Lewis saw John and came over and said, "Howdy. Ain't you going to have no fun to-night?"

Suddenly John felt no hesitancy about telling Trailer about it. He had never been able to talk to men before, because they always gawked at him, not believing that a kid who had two notches at seventeen could have the ordinary feelings of the ordinary man. Trailer somehow was different. He had had his bad time with the girl; he had bucked the horse and now it was out of him, one way or another. John leaned back and looked up at the whitewashed porch roof.

"I may have some fun later in the evening," he said.

"It comes on you fast, don't it?" Trailer came back, understanding at once. "Some wimmen is .45 caliber and some is .44 and some is .38, and so on down to little .22 women, and pocket pieces, and derringers. How you tell is how they hit you."

"Luisa, she's a stepped-up .45." He caught his breath like a man hit in the solar plexus. "Leaves a bad hole in you, too," he said in a lower voice. "Leaves you bleedin'."

"Not me," John said, swinging his body around so he could look at Lewis.

"Not me, she don't leave bleeding. John Anable, the Boy Wonder Peace Officer. That's me. You know what, Trailer? Tomorrow I'm liable to be on the other side of the fence. Maybe Agnew Overham can hire some boy with a limber wrist and a sharp eye to take me in. If she doesn't show up here, that is."

Lewis groaned.

"I was afraid of it," he said. He stood up. "You don't mind if I sort of mosey down and tell old Overham to pen up his cub, do you? A fair warnin's not against the rules, hey?"

"Suit yourself."

Lewis stood up and said, "Don't do anything foolish, podner," and then he went down the *galeria* to the steps, and called back from them, "There's her music. What do you call that clappin' piece?"

"*La Chiapaneca*," John said.

"OH." Trailer waited, shuffling his feet. "I had an idee I wanted to talk over to you. It's this way. Why don't you and me kind of tie up together and try to make ourselves a stake and go into the horse business? I know where there's a place for sale, up toward Lone Pine. Fourteen thousand acres, good stand of buildin's, plenty of trees, five streams, deer, bear, six thousand feet elevation. That part of California's really *livin'*!"

"How would we raise money for a ranch? I'm broke."

John was just being civil, and it irritated him a little when Lewis took him seriously.

"We got three hundred apiece here. That kind of pegs our price. We could take the act around a year—mebbe even take it east, me breakin' buckers and showin' off Shuffle and Painkiller, and you doin' that heartbreakin' stunt with the Hydes. I could be the Hydes, see. We could fix up some brush to take around with us, and I could change clothes where the folks couldn't see me. They come out one at a time, didn't they? Who's goin' to know the difference?"

John said, "Why, I'll think that one over, Trailer," and Lewis shook his head despondently.

"That means you're dead set on somethin' foolish."

He went out toward the fire-lit grove

without another word, just as the song reached its first chorus and the rhythmic clapping began. The beat worked on John's nerves like acid. He stretched out in the chair and pulled his feet loose in his boots and slid his hat down over his eyes, and still he tingled all over with every explosive handclap.

He heard the big yell in the middle of the song, and a man's jovial voice, and he knew what had happened. Mark Overham had jumped up on the table to dance with her. They would make a good-looking couple, and no doubt Overham was a good dancer, perhaps much better than the girl. The tune went on and on and on and died in mid-chorus because someone—Overham, probably—ran out of breath.

John waited until he was sure there would be no more of it, and then he lifted the big .45 from its holster and let the moon shine on it while he stared at it. There were two notches in the butt, for two Hydies. A man did that kind of silliness when he wasn't quite a man.

In all the succeeding years, John had killed only one man. It had rarely been necessary to shoot at all. Only once had he had to pull down, that time on one of the Stevens gang, a slope-chested Texan who was dying of tuberculosis anyway, and who had the killer's mania. The Texan ? ? ? ?

After it was over John dropped the gun back into its leather without cutting a mark. That helped raise his reputation; it was said John Anable had killed, five, six, seven, nine, twelve men, depending on where you heard the yarn. Only, it was made clear, he stopped marking for them.

His hand trembled and caused him to spill tobacco as he rolled the cigarette. He remembered her first use of his first name: *Roll me a cigarette, John*. He went weak all over. Had she been there then, he would have rolled her a cigarette and kneeled to hand it to her.

But she was not there, and he got the thing built at last, and a fire going in the end of it. He took his time smoking, giving her plenty of time, listening to the music when it started again—as he knew it would start. A deeply soulful piece this time, *La Paloma*, just right to hit the

heartstrings of a man fresh from the east. He smoked it down to a tiny butt. He dropped the butt on the floor and stood up and ground it out.

He ambled across the *galeria* and clumped down the stairs. Instinctively he looked up at the moon and measured his light, and then he scouted the shadows with his eyes, analyzing the way they fell so shadows would not fool him when the showdown moment came.

He passed the barbecue pit and entered deeper shadows again, and something hard eased into his back, and a voice said, "Keep your hands in sight, Senor Anable, and walk over by that tree. I give you my word, it would be a pleasure to kill you."

John kept his hands away from his side until the man reached under his arm and lifted out the .45. A big sigh came; he was not particularly happy about this job, whoever he was. John let the gun prod him over into deeper shadows, where he turned with his back to a tree.

"Hello, Hernandez," he said, recognizing the manager.

"You will kindly remain quiet," Hernandez said. He raised a light, shrill whistle between his teeth, and another *vaquero* came running. To him, Hernandez said, "Tell Senor Overham we have him, and to come quickly and quietly. Do not let anyone else come."

"Si," said the other, disappearing.

John leaned back against the tree and asked if he could have a cigarette. Juan uncertainly refused until he had patted John's clothing gingerly, looking for a small, hidden gun.

"So your forty a month covers this kind of work, too?" John said softly. Juan straightened angrily. "Or mebbe you get forty-five, or forty-seven fifty? When I was in the business of apprehending desperate men, I got five or ten times that. But I guess you just came with the place, hey? You'd lay down your life for the Overham that underpays you, eh?"

"You will kindly remain quiet," Hernandez repeated stiffly.

John got his heels firmly under him and whispered, "Or maybe you're in love with her, too? Maybe you're the kind that loves her so much you can't stand to see anyone get her but an Overham?"

IT WAS a sore spot, a running one, the kind of a red wound Trailer Lewis had described, and John's prod at it threw Juan off balance. He flicked up the gun.

John was waiting for it. He came in under the gun and knocked Juan's arm up. The gun crashed and the slug ripped through the trees over their heads, and John's own familiar .45 dropped out of the manager's waist band.

John kicked it aside and bored in, drilling with both fists, chopping away at Juan's middle until he buckled. He slid down in a heap, and John lifted the gun out of his limp hand and threw it away.

The shot had started them screaming. He scooped up his own gun swiftly and gave it an inspection in a patch of moonlight. He holstered it and faded back into the trees, circling around the edge of the grove while the pell-mell crowd ran screaming through it.

He heard Agnew Overham's voice peal out, calling Hernandez. The old man was full of terror. He heard Trailer Lewis bawl his name, swearing like a Barbary Coast bouncer. He slipped along from tree to tree, smiling slightly. He was relaxed and easy, and his palms were dry and cool and itching for contact with the carved .45 butt.

John rounded the grove and waited at the other end a moment, and heard them when they found Juan Hernandez. Juan thought he had gone back toward the big house, or somewhere—he could not be quite sure.

John began moving again, melting back from the crowd that boiled in terror toward the shadowy *cabanas* and back again when a woman screamed that she had seen him. They ran like sheep, and panic-stricken old Agnew Overham was the most useless, the worst scared, of the lot. Over and over again his stentorian voice bawled his son's name, urging him to take safety in a dozen different places. John laughed.

"It's Luisa. She's using her head. She's hiding him," he said to himself. "There isn't sense enough in the whole Overham family to keep Mark quiet this long. Now where—?"

He knew he was pretty good when it came to finding a man who did not want to be found. It was a matter of slow,

deep thinking, of self-confidence, of knowing that the odds were always on the law's side, the hunter's side. This was manhunting telescoped together, a whole career of it crammed into a few minutes, and he was up against a brain as shrewd and cunning and resourceful as his own.

Most criminals lost their heads in a pinch, but Luisa would not lose her head. She would keep cool, she would hide him in her pocket if need be, and if he ran them to earth before the Overham hands found him, it would not be in any ordinary hiding place.

It came to him suddenly where he would find them, and he laughed and started toward the big corral where he had showed them that afternoon how he killed the Hydes. It was wide open, and the last place he ought to look, and therefore the exact place Luisa would run to.

He broke into a run and hurled himself through the bars, and sure enough they were there, lying on the ground. They did not see him, until he said, "Luisa!"

The girl rolled over first and began screaming instantly. The crowd had all just run to the other end of the grove, chasing some noise or other. The girl's screams stopped them, and they began pelting back, and this time Trailer's whoop was louder than Overham's.

Mark Overham got up and said, "Here now, Anable, what kind of business is this?"

The girl kept on screaming, and John said, "Luisa, shut up. I told you I'd come, didn't I?" and it seemed perfectly reasonable. But she did not shut up.

He measured the ground with his eye. Beyond the corral was one of Overham's best horses—one left there by Juan Hernandez, no doubt. He was used to measuring in split seconds, and he knew how much time he had left before they got there. He could make the horse, all right, and if it was fast and tractable, and if he had any luck, he could break through. He would need food and water sometime, but he would take his chances on them. He had often enough before.

The girl stopped screaming, and he looked at Overham, and the look made the big man stand up. He was wearing a gun, a good-looking .45 in a handsomely

carved holster. John glanced back at the girl.

"He's going to get a chance to draw with me, Luisa," he said, "but you and I know it won't do any good. I'm going to kill him, and do you know—I don't give a damn! I guess you know how I feel, Luisa, because you're a kind of a killer yourself. You were right about that. We're too much alike. But you know how it is with me, because of that—don't you, Luisa?"

The girl gave a moan and stood up straight and started walking toward him. He heard her say his name over and over and over:

"John! John! John! You mustn't! You'll never hold up your head again, and I couldn't stand that, John dearest! Oh, you mustn't be a killer, John darling! Please, for my sake, don't do it, John. I don't want you to wake up nights and think about it and make it hell for both of us, John."

He looked at Mark Overham, and Overham said a little chokingly, "Go ahead and draw and be damned to you!"

John looked back at the girl and reached out his arm and caught her just as she started to slump down on her knees in front of him.

And he realized then that he could lift her up and take her away, and she would come willingly and follow him to the ends of the earth, and never look at another man. Her heartbroken cry was not faked, no matter what else she had faked in those seven or eight lost years.

She had never come up against a man like him, and he had defeated her, just as surely as he had defeated the Hydes. She was his if he wanted her.

But at the same moment he seemed aware of having aged quite a bit, of having take on a little bit of wisdom that he did not quite like. She would follow him—but she belonged here.

She was smart. She was lovely. She was ambitious. She would be strong and faithful, and the Overham strain needed all of those things. She would reign here like a queen, and the Overham line would prosper, and if she thought in the night of John Anable she would have sense enough to know she had taken the wise

course by staying, in not following him.

He said, "I guess I made a mistake, Luisa." Then he shook her and snarled into her ear, "Go back to your man! But tell him any man that raises a hand toward me is knocking on the pearly gates. I guess you know that, Luisa."

She still did not understand that he did not want her, and he gave her a little push and turned around with his hands up just as Trailer Lewis hit the second pole of the corral and rolled over. The next moment Trailer was ranged at his side, and John dropped his arms and hooked his thumb in his belt and said, "Well?" in a cold, ugly, arresting voice.

They stopped just beyond the fence, but Trailer kept on yelling, "Go ahead, boys, try your luck. I'm pretty good with a gun myself, see? Nobody lays a hand on my buddy, see? We wouldn't spend another night on this flea-sand for a deed to it, see?"

John met Luisa's eyes briefly. He grinned mockingly, and she hissed something bitter and vengeful and angry. But she thought fast. She went over and ran her arm through Mark Overham's.

John thought fast, too. He backed over to the other side of the corral and said, "Give us five minutes to get to our horses, *amigos*, and there won't be any more trouble."

* * *

Six minutes later they were footing along under the moon, trail-bound for Los Angeles. Lewis was full of plans for their exhibition. A year of making fools of themselves, he said, and they could retire to the Sierras for life. He was a born manager, was Trailer. If John had a will and an intelligence like Luisa's, Trailer had her cool skill in running things.

"Leaves a big hole in you, don't she?" the big man said at last, with a sympathetic laugh.

John grinned and scratched himself and said, "She does at that. But don't you know, Trailer, I had one in me before I met her. It came from killin' some men, and not knowin' what I was going to do with my life outside of kill—kill—kill."

"And, Trailer—that wound doesn't hurt any more!"

THE END

CALABOOSE



Gambler Rufus Shark had to rustle up a poker-faced owlhoot—or draw from a cold deck.



RUFUS SHARK closed the door, stood quietly in the dark of his stateroom, thin nostrils quivering. "Perfume," he murmured. It was thick and cloying and it spoke of the Orient and veiled women and the unanswered mysteries of the ages.

But no exotic female gave him answer. Nor did sounds of breathing reach his ears. Shark crossed to the table lamp, got the oil wick going under the stained-glass shade.

The room was empty. He stooped to peer under the wide brass-poster bed. Straightening, he grinned away a feeling of sheepishness for having done something outright silly. No female lay there—only bits of dust and his empty portmanteau.

He tried the dresser drawers, the closet. Nothing, apparently, had been disturbed. He hooked thumbs in pockets of pearl-gray vest and his sharp gray-blue eyes grew thoughtful under the curled brim of his tall cylindrical beaver hat.

Certainly no woman could have innocently mistaken his room for her own. The ladies' quarters were apart and far to the rear of the boat. He tossed the room key in his palm. How did she get in? And why?

Finally he shrugged, glanced at the wafer-thin gold watch that not so long ago had been the property of a poker-losing senator from Missouri.

It was, he saw, near time that he appear in the bar room, where "Bamboo" Johnson, his silent partner, was priming a sucker for a fleecing at three-card monte.

Shark crossed to the door, sniffing once more at the air, as one might sip at a nectar. Pray the gods of fortune arrange that he be present should the woman visit his room a second time. That perfume—Shark sighed deeply.

Sledge hammer blows sounded on the door panel.

Shark yanked the door inward.

Two men faced him in the corridor. The foremost was the barrel-like, blue-

and-brass uniformed Captain Horn. The captain's round ruddy face wore hard, stern lines. Under the peak of his master's cap, his bright blue eyes were brittle.

The chunky master of the palace-like *Belle of Orleans* had found it hard to forget his losses to the veteran river-boat gambler. Or rid himself of the suspicion that something more than luck lay behind Shark's uncanny good fortune. Whenever trouble headed Shark's way, the captain was sure to help it land four-square and under a full head of steam.

"I thought so," Shark declared.

"Thought what?"

The gambler stepped out into the corridor, causing the captain to take a backward step. "That my hard-knocking caller would be you." He pulled the door closed, heard the lock click. It would never do to have the captain catch a whiff of that perfume. The old billy-goat was a stickler for enforcing the *Belle's* strict moral code.

"So you expected me?" The captain's eyes showed a crafty gleam. "That just about clinches it."

"Does it?" Shark got the uneasy feeling that he was being dealt into somebody's dirty game—from a stacked deck.

"Don't pretend that you don't know that the purser's office has been robbed."

"The man was kneeling before the open door of his safe, making a tally," the second man spoke. He had a deep voice and his words came like blows on a bass drum. He was long and rangy in a baggy black suit. He wore a turned-around collar and a flat-crowned black hat with wide floppy brim. His face was gaunt and seamy, his head a long triangle with a ball-like chin for apex. His grayish eyes looked at Shark bleakly, without expression. "He was struck down from behind."

Captain Horn dipped a hand into coat pocket, came up with a long thick cigar, which he twirled in pudgy fingers. Shark

PERSUADER

By JOSEPH W. QUINN



The gambler's derringer boomed twice, coughing orange flame in the semi-darkness.

recognized the gilt-and-black band and the monogram, in Old English scroll: R.S. He had his cigars made to order in New Orleans.

"This is one of your personal cigars. We found it alongside the purser's safe." His gaze flicked to the pair of cigars peeking up out of Shark's breast pocket.

The gambler followed his gaze, then lifted one of the cigars from the pocket bit off its end. "Still doesn't prove anything," He turned his head to spit the severed cigar tip off his tongue.

The captain played his ace. "Deacon Jones saw you at the purser's counter a few moments before the robbery."

"Well, now," Shark got his cigar going, "these are mighty interesting cards you're dealing. When was all this?"

"About twenty minutes ago. Maybe you can account for your whereabouts in that time?"

Shark reflected. Twenty minutes ago he'd left the dining room, an exquisite guinea-hen dinner wrapped up in his gullet. Between then and now he'd encountered no one. "Perhaps," he answered laconically. "Perhaps not."

The deacon made a steeple with bony fingers at chest level. "I was enjoying an after-dinner stroll." He turned to the captain. "Your cuisine is marvelous, my dear captain." He turned back to Shark:

"When I came to that short corridor that leads from the deck to the purser's office I saw you. I did not see the purser. He was probably even then kneeling before the safe, unaware that he was about to be struck down. But I did see you—at the counter." He smiled with his mouth. His eyes remained bleak.

The deacon, Shark decided, was a cool cucumber. He let his gaze travel the man's length. "You're sure that it was me you saw?"

It was the deacon's turn. He gave Shark a sardonic survey, from bottoms of knife-crease trousers to cutaway coat, to tall cylindrical crown of beaver hat. His smile was mirthless. "I don't see how any one *could* mistake you."

Shark downed an impulse to push a fistful of knuckles into the man's wide, loose-lipped mouth.

The captain extended his hand. "I don't think I need tell you that it will go a lot easier with you if you return the box now—voluntarily."

"Box? None of the currency or passengers' valuables were taken? Only a box?"

"Ha! You well remember the contents of that safe!"

"I have valuables stored there myself. I've seen it when the purser had the door open—many times."

"A snuff box," the deacon supplied. "It's quite valuable. It once belonged to George Washington, the dearly beloved

father of our noble country. I understand you have quite a penchant for collecting odd personal items."

True. He liked to pick up and hold on to odd watch fobs, rings, stickpins and the like. His meagre collection was stored in the purser's safe and already included a gold snuff box molded in the shape of a gargoyles head. "For a happenchance witness, you're almighty familiar with the cards in this deal."

Deacon Jones saved the bottom of his nose with a long fore-finger. "It so happens that that snuff box was consigned to the purser by a very dear friend of mine in New Orleans, Mrs. Appelhwaite. It's rightfully the property of John Lord of St. Louis, her brother, who recently joined the souls who have departed this vale of tears.

"In other words, he's quite dead—and the snuff box is part of his estate. It was to be picked up in St. Louis by the attorneys for his estate. Miss Lois Lord, old John's daughter, is aboard the boat." He smiled thinly. "A sort of guardian for the snuff box on its journey."

"Do I get that snuff box or must I search you," the captain insisted.

"You've dealt me a hand that doesn't make sense," Shark retorted. "But by gad I'm going to play it. And somebody's going to wish he hadn't handed me cards in his dirty game!" He eyed the deacon coldly.

"You leave me no choice." The captain took a menacing step forward.

Shark stiffened. His hand dipped into vest pocket. Ol' Betsy, his twin-barreled derringer, appeared in his palm.

"You'll do well to keep your hands to yourself," he warned flatly.

The captain hesitated. His gaze flicked from the two big holes at the business end of the gleaming derringer to the flinty glint in the gambler's eyes. "You can't bluff your way out of this, Shark. Why you did it beats me. The evidence is more than conclusive. You're making it harder on yourself."

"I'll be the judge of that."

The captain shrugged. "We'll be in St. Louis in less than an hour. From here on it's a midstream run in fairly deep water. I don't see how you can escape from the boat. The authorities in St. Louis will

take care of you there. I'll see to that."

SHARK watched the two men walk down the carpeted corridor, the captain waddling like a duck, the deacon stiff and straight-legged, the wide loose brim of his hat flopping like the wings of a buzzard in flight.

One hour. Little enough time to draw cards and play his way out of this unholy frame. The police of St. Louis would be ruthless. He'd be arrested, probably convicted. What good his word against a man of the cloth and the master of the *Belle*? He shuddered at the thought of rotting away in some filthy dungeon. Worse, he'd be banished from the elegant *Belle*. The Mississippi steamer was dear to his heart—and his profession. Zounds!

Shark strode down the corridor, proceeded to the bar room, but did not enter. From the doorway he gave furtive sign to Bamboo Johnson, who was standing at the bar with the sucker he had in tow—a cotton buyer clad in white linens.

Shark then moved on to the lounge, pushed through the heavy mahogany door whose scroll-like gilt lettering spelled: GENTLEMEN. It was to this sanctuary that Shark and his silent partner retired when private conclaves became necessary. Otherwise they kept up the pretense of being strangers, or at best mere acquaintances.

In a moment Bamboo appeared and Shark gave the sign that they were alone. "What's up?" Bambo rolled his Pittsburg stogie in yellowed teeth, let his skeletal frame ease back against the huge marble basin.

In a few words Shark related what had happened.

"Well, I'll be the seventh son of a skunk!"

"Know anything about the deacon?"

"No more than you do."

"Ever hear of Mrs. Appelhwaite of Orleans? John Lord of St. Louis? His daughter, Lois, who's with us on the boat?"

Bamboo shook his head.

Shark handed him the key to his stateroom. "Don't let yourself be seen. Take a good sniff at the air in the room, then come back here."

Bamboo was back in less than five minutes. He regarded Shark quizzically, left eye cocked.

"What you're thinking," the gambler grinned, "is as wrong as a fifth ace. That perfume's a mystery. Ever whiff it on any of the ladies on the boat?"

"No. But I'll wager the gal that's using it is a sweetheart."

"She's mixed up in this deal. I want to find her. So keep your nose out for her. Meanwhile go back to the bar room. Pick up our little lamb. Hang on to him. Perhaps we'll fleece him yet."

Shark went out. Moments later he was knocking on the door to the purser's cabin.

"Come in," a voice called.

The gambler entered. The purser was seated on the edge of his bed, smoking a cigarette. He was a young man with a thick blond pompadour and ivory-white skin. The shadows under his pale blue eyes were much too deep and dark for his age. Two strips of white plaster made a cross at the right top side of his skull. He waited for Shark to speak.

"What do you know about Deacon Jones?"

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Purser George Blake took a deep pull at his cigarette, let smoke plume from his nostrils. "Nothing," he said, flicking a quick upward glance at the gambler.

"I'm the lad who's supposed to have handed you that headache. Got anything to say about it?"

"No."

"You haven't been doing so well at the craps table in Pierre's Casino down in Orleans. You're in hock—for plenty."

Blake stood up, saying: "That's my business."

"Somebody wanted that George Washington snuff box that Mrs. Appellthwaite had consigned to you for delivery at St. Louis. And they wanted a goat. I was elected. The deacon very conveniently saw me at your counter just before the robbery. One of my cigars was found beside the safe. All very neat and pat.

"And I think that if I'd been the framer instead of the framed I'd of thought of crossing the purser's palm with silver in exchange for taking a little tap on the head. That would make it a pat hand all around."

"You've got your cards messed, Shark," the purser retorted flatly.

"Have I?"

The pursor held Shark's gaze for a long moment. Then he turned, strode to the far end of the room, stood there eyeing the wall, hands stuffed deep in trousers pocket.

Shark studied the man's broad, rounded white-shirted back as wordless seconds ticked away. Finally he wheeled, went out. He didn't close the door. He heard it slam before he'd turned out of the corridor.

A FIVE-PIECE string orchestra was making sweet music on a purple-draped dais when Shark entered the huge crystal-chandeliered salon. He moved nonchalantly among the potted palms and the rich furnishings that included deep leather lounges and club chairs, richly holstered armchairs and straightbacks.

Shark was gratified to note that many women were taking their ease in the salon. He followed a circuitous route, getting as near to each woman as he could without being ungently or obvious. His nostrils caught whiffs of many perfumes—but

none that came even close to that exotic sense-tingling stuff that he'd sniffed in his stateroom.

He stood at the wide arched entrance to the salon, thumbs hooked in vest pockets, eyes fixed glumly on the shiny black tips of his shoes. Time was slipping rapidly by. Every turn of the *Belle's* paddle wheels brought him closer to the all-too-near wharf at St. Louis and the ruthless arm of the law.

A woman went by him hurriedly, headed out of the salon. Shark's head jerked up. His nostrils quivered. Egad! Here was his prey. The fickle gods of chance had smiled upon him. There was no mistaking that scent.

Shark hastened into the corridor, turned down it in the woman's wake. But her pace was rapid. Despite her long brown skirt, its billowy bottom fluttering about her ankles, she managed the rapid free-legged gait of a man without stumbling. Her arms swung at her sides.

Shark caught up with her where the corridor twisted left and right to the deck and dining room, respectively.

"I beg your pardon," Shark doffed his hat.

"Yes?" she smiled. She was hatless. Her hair was black as a raven's wing, piled high so that her ears showed, and topped by a cluster of pink ribbons. Her eyes were almost jet in their blackness, but bright. She was, Shark noted ruefully, far from the exotic slinking piece of feminine delicacy that that perfume had conjured in his mind.

She said, "Yes?" again, as Shark hesitated.

He decided that his best bet might be a bold frontal attack. "What," he said, "were you doing in my stateroom?"

She blinked. "What-was-I-doing-in-your-stateroom," she repeated his words in slow even cadence.

The gambler nodded. The sudden way that her lips came together, and the glint that sparked in his eyes, should have warned him. But it was too late. Her open palm met his cheek with a smack that resounded through the corridors and set his tall hat askew on his head.

"Wait!" Shark pleaded, hurrying after her and striving to ignore the hot prickling stinging in the flesh of his cheek. "Wait.

"You don't understand." He cursed himself as a fool for playing his hand this way.

She paused, turned, waited for him—grimly.

"I'm terribly sorry." Shark's apology was profuse. "Let me explain. My name is Rufus Shark. At the moment I'm on the horns of an enigma—and what an enigma." He explained all that had happened down to the moment.

As he spoke of the theft of the snuff box he saw her blanch, catch her underlip with short white teeth.

"You mean," she said when he'd finished, "that my father's snuff box has been stolen from the purser's safe?"

"Your father's snuff box—Then you're his daughter, Lois?"

She nodded. "I—I don't understand all this." She shook her head. "Just before my father died he told me to go down to Aunt Kate in New Orleans and tell her that she should send that snuff box to his attorneys in New Orleans. Aunt Kate is old and feeble and can scarcely read. That's why he wouldn't trust to a letter, but had asked me to go in person.

"When I got there Aunt Kate told me that some one had broken into the house and had opened her safe, but had taken nothing. She was sure the thief was after that snuff box, which she had stored away in a vase on the mantle.

"Your father was almighty mysterious about that old snuff box," Aunt Kate told me. 'He said something about it belonging to George Washington. I figured the best place for it was that vase. Nobody'd think of breaking into a vase.'"

"Did it? I mean, had the box once belonged to George Washington?"

"I don't know for sure. You never knew when Dad was joking or serious. He made a lot of money as a cotton broker in St. Louis. Mother disappeared several years ago, and father took up with that Vernon woman." A note of disgust crept into her voice. "He left practically all of his money to her. He was a grand guy," she sighed heavily, "but like all men he had his peculiarities. His hobby was engraving and etching. Things like scratching the Lord's Prayer on the head of a pin. He used to be an engraver for the government, up in Washington. He—"

She paused, abruptly. "But why am I

telling you all this. You're probably the man who tried to steal the snuff box from Aunt Kate. You failed. But you finally got it on the boat. You slipped up and now you're trying to make use of me in some way to slip clear. That nonsense about my perfume in your stateroom!" She left him to go out on the deck.

Shark hastened after her, stopped her at the rail. "I'm giving you a straight deal, Miss Lord."

She studied him. "You mean you actually smelled this perfume in your room? No man would think of using it. Few women would. It's rather daring." A red tinge crept up her neck and into her cheeks. "I bought it in the shop off the salon. I don't know whatever prompted me to."

"Deacon Jones claims he knows your aunt, Mrs. Appelthwaite."

"I didn't know that until he met me on the boat and told me that he knew Aunt Kate real well. He knew about the snuff box. He tried to be friendly, but I've held him off. Something about the man makes me squirm, even if he is a deacon."

"Did he say anything to you about your dad?"

"Oh, he gave me to believe that he knew about dad and that—that Vernon woman."

Shark started to say something, but the approach of a steward checked him.

"THE captain's compliments, sir," the steward said. "He'd like to see you in his office at once."

"Now what?" Shark muttered. "You tell that pompous old billy-goat—"

"He said, sir, that if you bucked to tell you that he's found the snuff box and that you'd be very interested as to where."

Shark eyed the girl sharply. "I'll wager the 'where' is my stateroom."

"But—" she began.

"Whoever could enter my room once could enter it a second time—and has."

Shark turned his face into the cool down-river breeze. Up there on the left bank the cluster of lights that marked St. Louis seemed ominously close. "Come along," he said grimly. His grip on Lois Lord's arm was firm.

Shark let the girl precede him into the captain's walnut-paneled office. The cap-

tain was standing behind his desk. Before him on the desk, its blue turquoise top gleaming in the lamp light, lay George Washington's snuff box.

The deacon was seated off to the side in a leather arm chair. He had his long legs crossed and his elbows were propped on the chair arms, bony fingers clasped close to the big ball of his chin. He seemed pleased with himself—like the cat that's just swallowed the canary.

The burly first mate stood off in a corner, arms clasped across chest, heavy face expressionless, almost bored. He didn't look at Shark.

The captain waddled out from behind his desk, graciously pushed a chair forward, bidding the girl be seated.

"It's rather a surprise to find you here with this man Shark."

"Rather," the gambler gave mimicking echo.

Captain Horn let his haunches come to rest on the front edge of his desk. "That's rather a—ah—heavy perfume you're using, Miss Lord."

The girl squirmed in her chair, gave an uneasy smile as the red tinge again crept up her neck. "I'm afraid it was something of a mistake. It's—well— It's too daring, I guess you'd say."

"You've caught a whiff of it before," Shark declared. "In my stateroom, I'd say. And just a short while ago."

The captain let Shark's words answer themselves. He moved around behind his desk.

"Up till about fifteen minutes ago," Shark declared, "Miss Lord was a total stranger. So how that perfume got into my room has been a tough nut to figure."

"You know that we found the snuff box hidden in your room?"

"It was an easy guess. The way I'm being framed in this deal that seemed like the next—and last—logical move. It wouldn't have been the deacon who suggested you search my room?"

"It was. And an excellent suggestion. It paid off. It didn't take me long to find the box—in your cigar box."

"Somebody likes my cigars—but not for smoking. Here—" He tossed a cigar across the room. "Try one—*deacon*." He spoke the last word derisively.

The deacon jerked forward, unclasping

his hands. Then he relaxed, let his fingers lay splayed on the chair arms. He ignored the cigar in his lap. His face remained blank; his eyes regarded Shark bleakly.

Behind Shark the door swung inward. Captain Horn glowered: "What are you doing here?"

"Why, Shark stopped by my cabin a few minutes ago. Said I was wanted here."

"That's right," Shark declared without turning. "He's one of the cards in this deal. Come in," he invited the purser, then moved over to the desk and picked up the snuff box.

Shark thumbed a small button at the front edge of the box. The lid snapped back. He peered intently at the gleaming but empty interior. He turned the box over in his hands. A sinking feeling entered the pit of his stomach. For the thing that he'd thought he'd find, and that would go a long way toward explaining things, wasn't there.

"Don't pretend that this is the first time you've seen that box," Captain Horn's derisive voice reached him.

"It so happens that it is. But you're the last one I'd expect to believe that." He turned his gaze back to the interior of the box. The two hollow cylindrical pieces protruding from its inner rear wall puzzled him. They framed tiny lettering: Carver's, London, 1800. Then suddenly the meaning of those tiny twin cylinders hit him. They were part of the hinge for an inner lid—a *missing* inner lid.

"It's no use, Shark," the captain was saying in a triumphant vein. "You've been caught in this little job—red handed. Your goose is cooked and you know it. Maybe you can bluff with the cards—but you can't bluff your way out of this!"

"You're letting yourself be ruled by personal prejudice, captain. The scriptures say that you should love thy neighbor as thyself. Isn't that so, deacon?"

The deacon cleared his throat. "But of course."

"Maybe you could tell us just where in the scriptures that appears?"

The deacon used his big hands to push his long angular frame up out of the chair. Under the wide floppy brim of his black hat his eyes remained bleak. "Now look here, captain," his booming voice intoned.

"I don't intend to stand here and let this common thief—"

"You're perfectly right," the captain put in.

Shark's voice snapped, whipping out the words. "I say you are an impostor—no more a man of the cloth than I am. What's more, *you're* the thief. You stole that snuff box and very neatly hung the job on me!"

"That's just enough!" Captain Horn bellowed. He beckoned to the first mate. "Put him in irons. Keep him there until you can pass him into the custody of the police at St. Louis."

The burly mate started forward.

"NO YOU don't!" Shark took three backward steps, swept the room with his derringier.

The girl let out a frightened gasp, pushed up out of her chair, upsetting it behind her.

The mate halted, eyed the gaping twin holes in Shark's derringier. He made no further move.

"This snuff box," Shark said slowly, weighing his words, "belonged to John Lord of St. Louis, who let it be known that it belonged at one time to George Washington. But that wasn't the reason that our friend the deacon was after it.

"John Lord's wife, Miss Lord's mother, disappeared some years ago. Why or how doesn't matter. Her father became enamored of another woman. A woman named Vernon. I'd guess that it would be better to say that he fell into her clutches. Isn't that right, Miss Lord?"

The girl tongued her underlip, nodded slowly.

Shark continued: "John Lord entrusted the snuff box to his sister in New Orleans, Mrs. Appelhwaite. Just before he died he sent his daughter down to tell her to forward the box to his attorneys in St. Louis. When he died it was found that he'd willed most of his estate to 'that Vernon woman,' as Miss Lord puts it.

"Now when that snuff box got into the picture it worried the Vernon woman. She knew John Lord's quirks. Knew that he liked to fool around with minute engraving. Like scratching the Lord's Prayer on the head of a pin. It just might be that the George Washington snuff box

contained some of John's engraving. Something that might cut her out of her inheritance.

"Let's say that she knew a man in Orleans who, for a fee, would undertake getting hold of that snuff box, one way or another. That man is our friend the deacon. He opened Mrs. Appelhwaite's safe, but didn't find the snuff box. He learned that it had been consigned to the purser on the *Belle*. He boarded the *Belle*, posing as Deacon Jones."

"I must compliment you, Shark," the deacon interposed. "You have a vivid imagination."

Captain Horn said: "There was nothing engraved on or in that snuff box. I examined it quite thoroughly."

"Take another look," Shark invited, "and you'll see part of a hinge for an inner lid."

"I can see where the box might have had an inner lid," the captain admitted.

Shark drew a deep breath. This was it. The showdown. He was gambling all the way. Gambling with the stakes higher than he'd ever known before—his freedom against a prison term.

"John Lord had engraved something on that lid," Shark plunged headlong. "Something that cut the Vernon woman out of her inheritance, or reduced it considerably."

"You're only guessing," the captain pointed out. "If there was an inner lid, where is it?"

"I think you'll find it in one of the deacon's pockets."

For a moment there was complete silence. The deacon blinked, his fingers curled slowly into balls at his sides. "Non-sense!" his voice boomed.

The captain toyed with the snuff box on the desk, frowning.

"The captain seems reluctant to have a look in the deacon's pockets. Supposing you do the honors, Miss Lord."

"Never mind!" Captain Horn's head jerked erect. He started out from behind his desk.

The deacon's quick intake of breath was plainly audible. He lunged, swinging a long arm that caught the captain under the chin, toppled him back across his chair, where he sprawled, legs kicking. In almost the same movement the deacon's

arm swept the desk lamp into swift flight.

Shark cursed as the lamp struck his chest. He stumbled backward a step. The glass shade splintered as it crashed on the floor at Shark's feet. Oil splattered. Tongues of flame crept along the carpet.

Shark saw the deacon's dark figure hurtling toward him, headlong. The gambler's derringer boomed twice.

The deacon came on, unchecked. His shoulder drove into Shark's midriff, pinned him against the wall, driving the air from his lungs.

The deacon scrambled to his feet and in half crouch dived for the brass of the door knob. His bony fingers had closed around it when the burly first mate's hand fell on his shoulder.

In one fluid movement the deacon's form was pulled erect and spun around. A rock of knuckles sledge-hammered his face, brought blood cascading down his shirt front. His figure took backward flight, crashed the opposite wall with a dull thud, then lay slumped at its base. The deacon didn't move. The mate crossed the room, bent over him.

SHARK, still reaching for breath, stamped out the lacework of oil-fed flames on the carpet, picked up the shadeless lamp, restored it to the desk.

The captain picked himself up behind the desk. "I'll be damned," he muttered.

"I guess that's the lid." The mate tossed a nickel plated disk on the desk. "And it's got writing on it, all right."

The captain got a magnifying glass out of desk drawer. "I, John Lord," he began to read, "being of sound mind—"

"Father's will," Lois Lord exclaimed.

The captain read it through. It renounced all previous wills and specifically the one which left the bulk of his estate to Loya Vernon, "a woman of wiles and connivery into whose clutches it was my misfortune to let myself fall." The new will gave one-third of his estate to his daughter, \$100 to Loya Vernon, and the residue to a trust for a St. Louis orphanage to be operated by his daughter.

"That's what he'd promised," the girl explained.

"The robbery," Shark stated, "was staged with the help of the purser, who also supplied the key to my stateroom."

Purser George Blake's voice was weary. "He had me in a squeeze."

"Craps at Pierre's. Bad luck. In hock for plenty," Shark supplied.

"It meant my job if it got to the captain. The deacon said it was only to be a joke."

"You're fired!" the captain snapped.

Blake grinned wryly. "I know it. I'm sorry, Shark. I feel like a heel. If it had come down to a conviction for you I'd have talked."

"If the deacon hadn't killed you first, to shut you up," Shark declared grimly. "The deacon was playing for keeps."

"I see what you mean. That perfume of Miss Lord's. When he lifted one of your cigars he sprinkled the stuff around. Bought it where she did—in the salon."

"But why?" Miss Lord asked.

Shark said: "Naturally I'd know I was being framed. The perfume was meant to make me look for a woman. You."

The captain said ruefully: "I see that I've let myself be hoodwinked badly."

"Next time," Shark warned grimly, "don't be so quick to hang a man. You might not find it healthy. What's more," he added, "when you looked at George Washington's snuff box the inscription should have told you something was wrong. It reads *Carver's, London, 1800*. Washington died in '99."

Shark took the girl's arm. "Come along, Miss Lord." He paused to hand Blake a cigar. "Give this to Pierre. Tell him I said to put you on as a dealer."

Blake swallowed. "Thanks, Shark, I—"

But the gambler was already on his way to the deck with the girl. They paused there, and she said: "Why didn't the deacon throw away dad's will?"

"Blackmail. He was going to use it on the Vernon woman to cut himself in for plenty. How about lunch tomorrow at the Imperial House in St. Louis?"

"Why, I'd—"

"Fine. Now if you'll excuse me. I think there's yet time for a—ah—little business matter in the bar room. . . ."

He left her. At the corridor door that opened off the deck he paused to look back. She was watching him. He liked the way she was smiling and the rich sound of her voice as she waved and called: "I'll see you in St. Louis."

FIDDLEFOOT ANGEL

By
CLIFF BISBEE
and
KURT REINEMAN



"She wants to be clothed in blue so that her spirit will be recognized by the white woman's spirit."

IT WAS in 1690 that Fray Manzanit and a party of Spanish missionaries entered the wilds of eastern Texas to convert Indians who, it was supposed, had never before had any direct contact with the whites. While cloth and other presents were being handed out to members of one tribe, a chief politely asked for some blue cloth.

When questioned, the chief explained:

Mysterious Maria managed to be in Old Spain—and new America . . . at the same time.

"When my grandmother was a little girl her people were visited by a young woman of the white race. She was beautiful and clothed in fine robes of blue. My grandmother and others of her tribe were baptized by the white woman, who then went away and was seen no more. Now my grandmother is about to leave this world. She wants to be clothed in blue so that her spirit will be recognized by the white woman's spirit."

Fray Manzanit and some of his men exchanged quick glances when they heard this story. "He must speak of Madre Maria—the Woman in Blue!"

Across the whole Southwest, from the Gulf of Mexico to the Pacific, zealous missionaries encountered persistent stories among the aborigines of the mysterious Madre Maria—the woman who always dressed in blue. Sometimes her full name was recalled—Maria Coronel.

For the few early travelers who knew some of the actual story, the mystery was intensified by these facts: The real Doña Maria—or Maria Coronel de Agreda—was a Spanish lady of noble birth who wrote several books describing her journeys among the Indians of the vast territory now embracing Texas, New Mexico and Northern Old Mexico, and yet *who never once left Spain!*

Doña Maria Coronel was born in the Castilian town of Agreda in 1602. She died there in 1665. Her entire life story has been well authenticated. Contemporaries described her as "cultured, of remarkable beauty and rare intellectual and spiritual attainments, devoted to the uplift and education of the poor."

In her writings Doña Maria insisted that she had made repeated journeys among various Indian tribes. She gave many accounts of their customs, clothing, dwellings and even tribal names. She claimed to have converted and baptized many Indians and to have promised them missionaries and teachers—promises she indeed labored all her life to fulfill. Several times she mentioned *always wearing blue on her travels.*

All the Indians who spoke of her agreed that the woman who came to them had been young and very lovely, always dressed in blue, and able to converse with them in their own tribal dialect!

Madre Maria would suddenly appear among them without provisions or water or traveling equipment of any sort. She would heal the sick and minister to their needs with great compassion, would speak to them of Jesus and promise that teachers would later arrive. Then she would mysteriously disappear.

Yet in Spain it had already been proven that Maria Coronel never once set foot outside her mother country. What is more, there is no record of any white person, man or woman, ever having visited the Indians in some of the areas where the stories were most persistent—until fully thirty years after Dona Maria wrote her accurate descriptions of those same areas and tribes!

Padres of the little mission San Agostin, near San Antonio, recorded, around 1668, that a delegation of Indians "from beyond the Rio Pecos" came to them with a request for missionaries promised many years before by *la señora vestido en azul*—the Woman in Blue. These particular Indians, so the padres thought, seemed already to be "somewhat instructed in the Christian faith."

The French adventurer Saint Denis wrote of having encountered legends about Madre Maria, during trading operations carried on with Gulf Coast natives in the Texas region between the years 1710 and 1714. Even the renowned missionary Junipero Serra, 'Father of California Missions,' wrote as late as 1775 of visits made a century and a half earlier by Maria Coronel.

On one hand, we have apparently irrefutable 'proof' that Doña Maria Coronel de Agreda could not possibly ever have left her native Spain at all—on the other, legends of many Indian tribes backing up the claims made by the woman herself.

Did a mysterious Woman in Blue actually travel alone among completely untutored tribes years before the earliest conquistador or zealous padre? If so, how—without her absence being noted in Spain? Indeed, how could a frail, lovely young woman have made long arduous journeys into an unknown land, when the harsh rigors and very real dangers of such a trip made even stalwart male adventurers of the period quake in fear?

Quién Sabe!

DEBT TO A BADMAN

A sneakin', thievin' bank bandit had robbed the town blind—but Cashier Bowman'd roast in hell before he'd tell that coyote's name.



The slender gunslick fired. . . .

By **RAY**
GAULDEN

RALPH BOWMAN finished totaling the string of figures and glanced up when the two men came in off the street. They were roughly dressed men, the lower half of their faces covered with red bandanas. They both had guns in their hands.

One of the men remained near the bank's double doors, wary eyes raking the street. He was slender and square-shouldered. There was, Bowman thought, something vaguely familiar about him. The other man was short, stocky, and had very little neck. He came swiftly toward the wicket, his eyes narrow and ugly.

Ralph Bowman glanced quickly about the cashier's cage. He remembered the gun in Charlie Freemont's desk drawer and he considered making a run for the

bank president's office. He half turned—then froze.

The stocky man's voice lashed at him: "Stand still, fella! We mean business."

Bowman moistened his lips and moved back to the wicket. He pushed his green eye-shade back a little. He said, "You'll never get away with this."

The big Navy Colt was almost in his face and he wondered if the man was going to kill him. The thought brought sweat to his forehead and to the palms of his hands.

"Clean out the safe, fella, and don't give us any silver. Get going!"

Bowman hesitated, trying to think of something he could do. He looked over the stocky man's shoulder, staring hard at the slender bandit who was watching the street. Bowman knew damned well he had seen that gent somewhere.

The sinister click of the big Colt's hammer brought Bowman's eyes back to the stocky man.

"I said get moving!"

Bowman opened his mouth then, closed it. On stiff legs, he walked to the corner of the cage and knelt before the big, iron safe. He took some canvas bags and began filling them with currency. His mind was racing, and he thought about old Charlie Freemont, back there in his office. He hoped his boss wouldn't walk in on this, because he was a stubborn man, an ex-cowman, and he might get himself killed.

Bowman arose and returned to the wicket, his mouth a thin, straight line. The masked man snatched the money sacks and tossed two of them to his companion. Then he was backing toward the door. Bowman thought, *If only somebody would come along.*

But nobody else in Paladura had any idea what was going on here. Through the double doors, he could see part of the street; he could see the big oak tree in front of Will Paris' hardware store and the way the sun was shining on the new wash tubs Will had lined up on the porch.

Then the squeak of a door drew Bowman's attention and he groaned as old Charlie Freemont came into sight. An old bone-handled six-shooter was in his hand and he swung it toward the bandits just as they were going out the door.

The stocky man ripped out an oath and the slender one whirled, his weapon

tipping up. Bowman yelled, "Get back, Charlie!"

But the banker did not heed the warning. He was trying to get his gun in line, but he was an old man and the speed had left him. The slender gunslick fired and Charlie Freemont went back against the door jamb. His six-shooter fell to the floor and he stared at it as if he couldn't understand what had caused him to drop it. He bent down, and then his legs went from under him and he hit the floor hard.

Bowman ran out of the cage, half expecting them to cut him down, but they were gone now, and through a side window, he had a glimpse of them racing down the alley. He saw that the slender man's mask had slipped down a little. Enough of the face was exposed to reveal the man's identity.

Brice Mason! Bowman's brain screamed the name at him, and the cashier was suddenly weak and sick. He stood there for a moment, forgetting about Charlie Freemont, while his mind whirled and his stomach muscles quivered. It would just about kill old Dave Mason if he found out his only son had turned bank robber and shot Charlie Freemont. . . .

BOWMAN stood just outside the door of Doc Ringer's little office and listened to the murmur of talk running through the crowd that had gathered on the plank walk.

He didn't give a damn about that wild ranny, Brice, but Dave Mason was the best friend Ralph Bowman had in the world. Two years ago when Bowman had hit this town, flat broke, Dave Mason took him into his home and treated him like his own son. Finally, he had gotten Bowman the job here at the Paladma National.

Bowman moved his eyes and saw a man coming down the street. He recognized Dan Hellman, one of the big ranchers and he watched the man push through the crowd and stop in front of him.

The rancher said, "I just heard about it, Ralph. How much did they get?"

Bowman pulled one of his black sleeve guards up, finding it hard to meet Hellman's stare. "They about cleaned us out, Dan."

Hellman was not much past forty, but Bowman thought that he looked a lot older

now. His shoulders dropped a little and he said heavily, "I had every dime I've got in that bank. It'll break me."

Bowman stared out across the strip of chocolate-colored dust at the red and white striped pole on the front of the barbet shop. He said without looking at Hellman, "I'm sorry, Dan."

The door of the office opened and Doc Ringer came out, his face damp with perspiration. The townsmen fell silent and all eyes turned toward the man of medicine. Ringer said, "I've got the bullet out, but he's in pretty bad shape right now. He'll live, though."

Bowman had been holding his breath; now it came past his lips in a long sigh of relief. He couldn't let Brice Mason get away with murder, but if Charlie Freemont came out of it all right. . . .

The swift clatter of hoofs drew Bowman's attention and he watched Sheriff Joe Castle ride into town at the head of a posse. Bowman could tell by the look on Joe Castle's leathery face that they had done a lot of hard riding for nothing.

The sheriff said, "They gave us the slip when we got to Sunbonnet Crick."

Thinking of old Dave Mason, relief touched Bowman briefly. He heard Dan Hellman swear softly.

"Damn it, Joe, you've got to get that money back."

The sheriff's face was sober. He said, "I'll do the best I can. What little money I been able to save was in that safe, too."

The crowd broke up and Bowman moved down the street. He had the queer feeling that Joe Castle's eyes were on him.

Bowman was not a drinking man and he was not in the habit of going into Hap Wyman's Bar in the middle of the afternoon. But he headed there now, feeling the need of whiskey. He was about to step upon the porch of the saloon when someone called his name. He stopped and turned around and saw Leah Miles cutting across the street toward him.

The sight of the girl took some of the weariness from Bowman and he felt the old yearning down inside him. She didn't know about that. There were a lot of things she didn't know; he had always kept his feelings hidden.

She was a small girl, not really beautiful, but there was warmth in her eyes and

there was sincerity. She said, "I just heard about it, Ralph. Was Charlie Freemont hurt badly?"

"The doc says he's going to be all right."

Her nearness disturbed Bowman, just as it always did, and he cursed himself. She wasn't for him. She was Brice's girl and everybody knew it. Next month they were to be married. Old Dave Mason was always talking about it, looking forward to the day when Brice would bring Leah out to the ranch to live.

Dave figured the kid would settle down then, forget his bell-raising and build the ranch back to the proud spread it had been when old Dave was able to sit a saddle.

The girl said, "The bank wasn't insured, was it?"

Bowman shook his head. His eyes were somber. "No," he said. "It wasn't."

Will Paris came out onto the porch of his hardware store, and seeing Leah, called, "I've got one of those new flour sifters in that your mother was asking about."

"I'll be over in a minute," Leah said, and then moved her eyes back to Bowman. She said, "You haven't been around lately, Ralph."

"I—ve been kind of busy."

"Would you like to come to dinner tonight? We're having fried chicken."

Bowman did not look at her directly. He said, "Thanks, Leah, but I guess I better not. I'll have to go over the books and see how we stand."

HE STOOD there on the plank walk until she had gone into the hardware store. He turned and entered the saloon and walked up to the long bar. "Whiskey," he said.

Paul Weldon, the gambler, was sitting alone at a corner table playing solitaire. He pushed back his chair and joined Bowman at the bar.

Weldon said, "First time I ever saw you take a drink in the middle of the day, Ralph."

Bowman tried to put a smile on his lips. He said, "After what happened a while ago, I need one."

Weldon was not an old man, but his hair was white and there was a weariness in his eyes. He was an honest gambler

and Bowman had grown to like the man quite well. The two of them had spent some long evenings together, playing poker in one of the back rooms and talking. The stakes were never high.

They were drawn together, perhaps, Bowman thought, because they were both from the East. The gambler talked little of himself, but Bowman always felt that the man had suffered a great hurt somewhere in the past.

Weldon said, "That's the first stick-up we've had around here in a long time. Suppose it was a couple of local boys?"

"Could have been, Paul."

Bowman turned his head as the slatted doors opened and Joe Castle came in. The sheriff stepped up to the bar and wiped perspiration from his face with a red bandanna. He nodded to the gambler, then turned his eyes to Bowman. He said, "Dan Hellman is taking it pretty hard. He's mad and he says he's going to have my job if I don't get him money back. Damn it, Ralph, can't you describe those guys a little better?"

Bowman shook his head. "All I could see was that gun stuck in my face."

The gambler said, "Now me, I never had enough money to keep in a bank."

Castle frowned. "This ain't no time to be funny, Paul."

Weldon sobered. "I'm sorry, Joe. Seems like I'm always saying the wrong thing."

The lawman turned to Bowman again. "Keep trying to remember, Ralph if there wasn't something about one of them that would maybe give us a lead."

Bowman swallowed hard and wondered if they could hear the way his heart was hammering against his ribs. He said, "If I do, Joe, I'll let you know."

After supper Bowman sat for a while on the porch of the hotel. When darkness had closed in, he went down to the livery stable. Ten minutes later, he was riding out of town on a long-legged black, heading for the Mason ranch on Sunbonnet Creek. After a mile, he left the main trail and cut into the hills. He was taking the short-cut that old Dave had shown him.

The moon came up and lighted the range with its soft, yellow glow. He came to a little stream that twisted down from the mountains and he remembered that not

far ahead was one of Dave Mason's line-shacks. He rode in sight of the camp and then he reined the black in, watching a horsebacker ride swiftly away from the line-shack.

Bowman sat there in the darkness, frowning, wondering. He was certain that old run-down cabin had not been used as a line-camp in a long time.

He reached the Mason ranch and saw that a lantern was burning in the barn. He headed his mount in that direction, riding slowly.

Brice Mason was unsaddling his horse, but he stopped and came to the doorway when Bowman rode up. The restless-eyed young man stared at the cashier warily, his nostrils flaring a little.

"What do you want here, Ralph?"

Bowman dismounted and stood holding the reins in one hand. He studied Brice Mason and it was not hard for him to see why any girl would be attracted to him. The man was well put together and he was handsome in a dark, reckless kind of way.

Bowman said, "I recognized you today, Brice. Your mask slipped when you were going down the alley."

Young Mason took a step back and his eyes were suddenly bright and wicked. His hand jerked a little and moved toward his gun. Then he caught himself and tried to grin. "You're crazy," he said.

Bowman shook his head, his eyes never leaving Brice's face. "No, Brice," he said, "I think you're the one that's crazy."

Brice Mason licked his lips. He looked a little desperate now, a little frightened. He said, "What do you intend to do?"

BOWMAN glanced briefly toward the ranch house. He said, "I'm thinking of Dave, and what it would do to him if he found out. So, I'm going to give you a chance to bring the money back. Say you found it; say anything, but see that it's returned."

A man's voice came across the yard: "That you down there, Ralph?"

Bowman glanced over his shoulder, calling, "Be up in a minute, Dave." Then he looked back at Brice and said, "Remember, you've got till tomorrow to get that money back."

Brice Mason opened his mouth, as if he were going to say something, then he

closed it tightly and sat down on a nail key, staring bitterly at the ground.

Bowman led his horse across the hard-packed ranch yard. He saw Dave Mason sitting on the porch of the big log house he had built with his own two hands. The old cowman had a blanket across his knees. His face looked drawn and there were lines of pain about his mouth.

Mason said, "Hello, Ralph. I was just thinking that it was about time you was paying me a visit."

"Just stopped by for a minute, Dave. We had a little trouble in town today."

Mason nodded. "I heard about it, son, and if I was able to sit a saddle, I'd help hunt down the skunk that shot Charlie Freemont. Never was a squarer man lived than old Charlie. The sheriff got anything to go on?"

"Nothing, Dave."

Mason said wearily, "It'll ruin some good men around here."

A breeze came down from the hills, ruffling the old cowman's bare head. He shivered a little and Bowman said, "It's getting a little chilly, Dave. Better let me help you inside."

Mason's lips twisted faintly. "It's sure a hell of a note," he said, "when you have to have somebody help you in and out of the house."

"Oh, hell, Dave. You don't do so bad."

"I ain't getting any better, Ralph. Damn it, I wish you had stayed out here and learned the cow business."

Bowman felt worse than he had in a long time. He said, "Pencil work is about all I've ever done, Dave."

"Yeah, I know, son." The old cowman looked up suddenly, trying hard to smile. "Don't worry about me. This is just one of my nights to feel sorry for myself. Next month, Brice will be bringing Leah out to the ranch and everything will be fine then."

"Sure, Dave," Bowman said. "Everything will be swell."

Bowman took his time riding back to town. There was a washed-out feeling inside him and his thoughts were not pleasant. He was nearing Sunbonnet Creek when he spied a rider on the trail ahead. They drew closer and Bowman recognized Paul Weldon.

Weldon said, "I didn't know you had

left town, Ralph. I was looking for you. Thought maybe we might take a little ride together."

They had grown to like this country, Bowman was thinking, both of them. They had hunted and fished together, and hardly a night passed that they did not take a ride into the hills.

Bowman said, "I don't feel up to it tonight, Paul. I think I'll go on back to town."

Weldon smiled. "I like the smell of that sage and old Red is feeling frisky tonight. I'll see you later." He spoke to the roan and headed toward the hills.

Back in town Bowman walked down the dark street. There was a dull ache back of his eyes. The plank walk ended and he was on the outskirts of the town. He came to Mother Miles' boarding house and he would have walked on by, but someone called his name.

He stopped, trying to shake the gloomy mood from him. He turned his eyes toward the front porch and saw Leah Miles sitting on the top step. He went up the flower-lined walk and sat down beside her.

The girl said, "You were going right on by."

"I didn't realize where I was," Bowman said. "I was just walking."

They were still for a while and Bowman could feel her eyes on him, but he did not look at her. Finally she said, "Ralph."

"Yes?"

She paused again as though she didn't quite know how to begin. Then she said, "Ralph, I don't know what to do."

"About what, Leah?"

"About Brice and me. Oh, I know I promised to marry him next month, but that was a month ago and he's changed a lot since then."

There was a queer feeling inside Bowman. He said quietly, "You love him, don't you, Leah?"

"I used to, Ralph—at least I thought I did. We grew up together and Brice always said we would get married some day. He was the only boy I ever went with. . . . He was always a little wild, but I never thought much about it until after we set the date for the wedding. Then Brice started drinking and gambling a lot."

Bowman felt ill at ease. He said, "But you decided not to break off with him."

"I was going to, Ralph, but I got to thinking about Dave Mason, and how he was looking forward to me coming out to the ranch, how he was hoping that I would be able to straighten Brice out."

Bowman looked at her now, at the pale oval of her face. He said, "I—I'm sorry. I never figured it was this way."

Her eyes found his and she said, "I had to tell you Ralph."

He wanted to take her in his arms. He wanted to do that more than he had ever wanted to do anything in his life. But he told himself that he didn't have the right. Not now.

THE sound of a horse's hoofs pulled Bowman's eyes toward the moon-lit street. He made out the figure of a man, wobbling in the saddle as though he had a few too many drinks in him. The horse came closer and recognition sent a little shiver of fear through Bowman. He ran down the path and into the street.

The red roan stopped and Paul Weldon was like a rag doll in the saddle. He had both hands around the horn, but Bowman could tell that the gambler wasn't drunk. He swayed and would have fallen, but Bowman caught him. He held him in his arms, feeling the blood that had soaked through the back of Weldon's coat.

Bowman was not aware that the girl was beside him until she spoke. "Take him in the house, Ralph."

Bowman laid him on a couch in the living room. "You'll be all right, Paul. I'll have the doc here in no time."

Weldon's face was the color of weak milk. He shook his head. "No time for the doc, Ralph."

Bowman glanced at the girl, then moved back to the couch and knelt beside it. "What happened, Paul?"

The gambler wet his lips. "I shouldn't have taken that ride tonight, Ralph. . . . I stopped to have a drink from the creek. Two gents were on the other side of some brush. I heard some talk."

The gambler broke off, his face twisting with pain. Bowman laid his hand on the man's shoulder. "Better not try to talk any more, Paul."

Weldon waited a moment, then he said, "Got to tell you the rest of it, Ralph."

Those gents were talking about fixing you, so they wouldn't have anything to worry about. Then old Red stamped his foot and they knew I was there. They cut down on me and then they rode off, figuring I was dead. But—but I—"

Weldon quit talking then and Bowman knew that the gambler had sat behind his last green-topped table. Bowman stood there, looking down at him for a moment; then he turned toward the door.

Leah stared at him, her face pale. "Ralph," she said in a frightened whisper.

But he did not look at her and he did not stop. He went out onto the dark street, moving swiftly, determinedly toward the red brick building. He entered Charlie Freemont's office and got the old banker's six-shooter. He put the weapon inside his shirt and went out and down to the livery stable. He passed the sheriff's office and thought, briefly, of Joe Castle. He knew he should talk to the lawman, but he didn't.

Bowman told himself that he was to blame for Weldon's death. If he had told what he knew, Brice Mason would be behind bars right now. Bowman's eyes were bitter, his face set. He got his horse and rode out of town, heading for the hills.

Unless he missed his guess, Brice and his partner would be at that old deserted line-shack. They would probably be splitting the loot about now, getting ready to quit the country after killing Weldon.

Bowman came in sight of the cabin and dismounted, leaving the black in a stand of timber. He moved toward the cabin, aware of the gun pressing against his stomach. He saw a horse in front of the door and he wondered why there were not two. Quietly he went forward and peered through the dirty paned window. He saw that Brice Mason was alone in the one-room shack. The man was bent over a table where the stub of a candle cast feeble light over the stacks of green-backs.

His lips tight, Bowman put his hand on his gun and stepped through the half-open door. Brice Mason whirled around. He straightened slowly.

Bowman said, "Thinking of pulling out, Brice?"

Young Mason moved back until his

shoulders were against the rough walls of the cabin. He rubbed his right hand on the legs of his jeans, but he did not touch his gun. He said shakily. "You've got it wrong, Ralph. I was fixing to bring the money back."

There was desperation in Mason's eyes. He said hoarsely, "Give me a break, Ralph. I was half drunk yesterday, and I run into that outlaw, Frisbie. I let him talk me into robbing the bank. I didn't know what I was doing."

In the center of the room, Bowman stopped. He said tonelessly, "You'll never change, Ralph. And you can't bring Paul Weldon back to life."

Brice Mason's face was shiny with perspiration. "Wait, Ralph. I didn't kill Weldon—it was Frisbie. I tried to stop him. I—"

A sound from behind him brought Bowman half around. The short-necked outlaw stood weaving in the doorway, the front of his shirt smeared with red. There was a wild look in his eyes. "Mason, you double-crossing snake!"

There was a gun in Frisbie's fist and it roared. Mason was clawing frantically at his own weapon when the bullet found him. He took two steps away from the wall and went down on his face.

Bowman leaped back, whipping the gun from the front of his shirt. Frisbie had

turned toward him now, and the outlaw's second bullet tugged at his shirt. Then Bowman fired and Frisbie went through the door backwards. Bowman heard him hit the ground outside.

Silence moved into the room and Bowman waited a minute, then walked outside. He saw Frisbie lying on his back. Bowman moved close and Frisbie opened his eyes and coughed.

Bowman knew that the man did not have long. "What happened?"

Frisbie coughed again. "After we shot that gambler, Mason turned his gun on me, rode off and left me for dead. . . ."

Ralph Bowman rode slowly toward Paladura, leading two horses with their riders draped across the saddles. He was the only one who would ever knew what had really happened in that old line-shack. He would tell the folks in town that one of the bank robbers had gotten away, that Brice had shot it out with the other one. That lie would make it easier for Dave.

And thinking about the cowman, Bowman decided that he was going to give up his job at the bank. He didn't know anything about the cow business, but he could learn. Old Dave, he figured, would get a kick out of teaching him.

And after a while, Bowman thought, maybe Leah Miles could move out to the ranch after all.



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CHAPTER

1

Vengeance Trail

Dave Austin rode into the hot dusty little town of Oracle on the tall trail-weary black. He had hated the smallness and the sameness and the dullness of it when he had left four years before, his jaw sore and swollen from where his brother's fist had connected. He hated the town even more after the absence.

The hooves of the black kicked up little puffs of white dust as he rode by the store, the livery stable, Ike Andres' saddlery, the closed office of the deputy sheriff, the frame and adobe Oracle House, the Easy Do Saloon.

Two wagons were hitched in front of the Oracle House, and some hot saddle stock stood and fretted at the flies in front of the Easy Do and the Gay Gold further down the street.

He pulled up the black, and the pack horse, stupefied by the heat, walked into the black and dodged stiffly as the black kicked at it. He pulled around and went to the stable, swinging down from the black and peering into the dark hay-smell of the place. An old man in broken boots slept on a pile of hay.

Dave unsaddled and slapped the black into a stall; he grunted as he slid the bedroll off the pack horse. It thudded onto the board floor. The old man woke up, blinked at him blearily and went back to sleep.

Dave walked over and kicked him lightly in the ribs. "Get up and take care of my stock."

The old man sat up. "I see you was doing everything yourself and—" The old man stopped abruptly. "Dave Austin, ain't you?"

"Yes."

The old man bounced up with surprising agility. "What you going to do about your brother Pete?" Dave looked at him steadily, didn't answer. "All right, forget I asked you. I know what I'd do."

"And what would you do?"

"I'd get to hell back on my horse and get out of here. Hawson'll send his boys onto you one by one until one of 'em guns you down."

"And what about Hawson?"

"He don't carry no gun no more. Best thing you can do is get on out of Oracle. Hawson has brought in maybe seven bad ones in the last two years. One of 'em got Pete. You haven't got a chance."

Dave Austin looked at the old man for a long moment, shouldered the heavy bedroll, yanked his carbine out from under the *rosadero* and headed out into the sunlight. It was only a hundred feet to the wide porch of the Oracle House, but he was sweating heavily before he reached it.

An old man dozing on the wide porch took a long look at Dave, swallowed heavily and the front legs of his chair thumped down onto the boards. As Dave walked in the door the old man on the porch spat across the railing with great deliberation and little accuracy.

Martha Deen, the fat, pleasant, sloppy wife of Sid Deen who owned the Oracle House, came from the back of the place when Dave thumped on the desk.

She walked heavily to the desk, stopped suddenly and then walked toward him more slowly. "Hello, Dave."

"Hello, Martha."

"The town's been sort of waiting on you, Dave."

"I heard five days ago. I was about a hundred and forty mile down the line."

"You shouldn't have come back, Dave."

"I want a room, not advice, Martha. So far you're the second one I've talked to. And you both tell me to get out of town."

"You shouldn't be silly for Pete's sake, Dave. He was a mean, stubborn man, and forty people told him he shouldn't have set up his spread right in the way of Hawson."

"How about that room?"

She sighed. "Second floor. The one facing the stairs. Door's unlocked. Where do you want your stuff sent?"

"Sent?"

"After one of Hawson's boys kills you."

"You keep it, Martha. I was going to ride on through and stay out to Pete's place, but I figured this'd be handier."

She laughed. It was a flat, mirthless sound. "You wouldn't of liked it out there, Dave. Pete had lots of notes outstanding to Ryan over to the store. Maybe half again the value of the place after this hot spell. Stock dying all over. Hawson just upped and bought up the notes and foreclosed the place and sold it to himself. Using it as a fine camp right now I hear. Intends to, anyway."

Dave shouldered the bedroll, trudged up the stairs and pushed the door to his room open. He dropped the bedroll on the floor, stripped, poured water into the basin and sponged the trail dust off his body. He squatted by the roll, opened it up and took out fresh clothes.

He was lean and hard and too thin

for his height. A white puckered scar cut across the ridges of muscle on his back. His features were so regular as to have been characterless were it not for a deep hardness in his eyes, a rigidity about the set of his mouth. He dressed, strapped the gun belt around his thin waist, sat on the edge of the bed and wiped trail dirt from the butt of his single-action peacemaker. The walnut grip fitted comfortably into his palm.

He sat for a long time and pondered what the old man in the stable had said. He thought of what Martha had said. Finally he unstrapped the gun belt, tossed it into the open bedroll and threw a corner of the tarp over it.

LIKE ANDRES came to the door of the sadlery, took Dave's right hand in both of his and drew him inside. Ike, in spite of his smallness, had been a foreman for Dave's father during the early days. A bronc he had been breaking had crushed him against the snubbing post in the middle of the round corral. He had mended, but he would never swing up onto a pony again. He was a gray little man with wide soft eyes and a bitter, twisted mouth.

"Dave, boy!" he said gently. "Dave!"

Dave permitted himself the first smile since entering Oracle. "Hello, you old horsethief!"

They went into the back room where Ike slept. Ike sat on the bed and Dave leaned against the wall and smiled down at him. They were both uncomfortable.

"How did it happen, Ike?" Dave asked.

"The dryness, boy. Hawson's holes dried and he moved in on Pete. Pete and his two hands shot about thirty head, but Hawson's men pulled down the fence Pete had put up around his best hole and the Hawson beef trampled the hole to a mud wallow. The next day somebody found Pete over near Spike Ridge. Shot in the back of the neck. The horse had bucked him into the rocks. He wasn't pretty. I had him buried over on the hill next to your folks."

"I owe you whatever it cost."

"You don't owe me a damn thing!" Ike said angrily. "Your old man set me up in this place when I couldn't ride no more.

So don't you try to talk slop to me."

"Where's Pete's stuff?"

"Over there in the corner. Clothes. And that box there is full of things I took out of the house. Some silver that belonged to your ma. The old man's books. Family Bible. Pete's roan is over to Louis Besa's place. I had it took over there before Hawson could grab it along with the spread. The horse and stuff belong to you."

Dave looked at the rough wooden box that held his patrimony and his inheritance. He rolled a smoke and found that he was pinching it so tight between thumb and finger that it wouldn't draw. He dropped it to the floor.

He thought of the bitter, back-breaking labor that had been the lot of his father and mother until they had gotten far enough ahead to hire ranch hands. He remembered the day during the long drought when his father, bone weary from trying to save weak stock, had been caught in the dry wash by a ten-foot flood wall coming down from the mountains. His mother had died a month later.

The foreman who had replaced Ike had been no good. The ranch had been sold to pay the debts. He and Pete had been too young to work it. Hawson, his saddlebags heavy with gold from the Black Hills, had bought in. Pete and Dave had gone to stay with Ike, and one day Pete had hit the adobe wall with his hard young fist and said, "I'm going to get it all back. Every square foot of it. Every blade of grass!"

They had worked for day wages, and in the end Pete had insisted on claiming at the base of the hills just beyond the west boundary of Hawson's spread. They had argued about the location. At twenty, Dave had ridden out of Oracle, his jaw sore, his mind full of the harsh quarrel with Pete.

Dave looked at the box and said hoarsely, "That's about the same amount of stuff we had when the four of us first come out here. Haven't got far, have we?"

"What you been doing?" Ike asked quickly.

"Everything. Trapped and broke mustangs. Trail boss. Winter line-camp. Deputy in a silver town."

"Can you shoot?"

"As well as most. Not as good as some that live off it."

"Hawson stayed right quiet until he started to make money. Then he began to elbow little spreads out of his way. Unexpected fires during the night. Brawls picked by his men. He's got maybe thirty regular cowhands now. He pays 'em good."

"But he's also got maybe seven men he's brought in. A rough string. He don't give those boys no cow work. Some of them ride with him wherever he goes. Hawson wants to be king of this country. Right now you might say he's crown prince. Where's your gun?"

"I hear Hawson don't carry one. I hear that if I carried one, his boys'd nudge me into a fight."

Ike looked thoughtful. "What are you fixing to do?"

"Damn if I know. Pete was shot in the back of the neck. I'd like to get Hawson the same way."

"You don't stand a chance, boy. Not a chance."

"Tell me more about Jud Hawson."

Ike scratched his lean jaw. His eyes were somber. "Not much to tell. His hair's gone white and he's took to wearing it long. He's got kind of a wild look in his eye, and he talks to folks about seeing visions of people coming to him and telling him that he is the king wheel of this part of the country. Heard tell that out at his spread he makes the folks bow from the waist when they want to talk to him."

Dave was silent for long moments. He rolled another smoke, dragged deeply on it. His mouth was like a deep gash in saddle leather.

Ike said softly, "Going to miss Pete a lot, Dave. He was a stubborn fool, but he did what he thought right. Kind of vain about hisself, too. Wore that big old white-colored hat and had Ryan over to the store stock those yella shirts from Mexico."

"Maybe you better ride back out and forget this mess, Dave," Ike said. "In order to get to Hawson you'll have to gun your way through the seven rannies he's got, and by the time you've knocked off a couple he'd have more hired. Besides, it's a good bet that every damn one of them is faster than you."

Dave smiled tightly. "Look at this,

Ike. See? Nothing in my hands." He yanked his right arm up, the elbow sharply bent so that his fist came close to his ear. The arm flashed down and a lean knife with a slim blade and a rawhide handle buried itself in the doorframe with a chunking sound.

Ike said softly, "I'll be damned! How'd you do that?"

"Broke a leg in Mexico. While it was mending a *paisano* taught me. See how the right cuff on this shirt is loose? I got this piece of rubber around my arm. The knife goes under it with the hilt toward my wrist. It stays there until I snap my arm back. Then it slips out and I grab the blade as it goes by."

"I've won over two hundred dollars with that little knife. Stand side by side with a gun fighter and somebody gives the word and I put the knife into a tree twelve feet away before he can get a slug into it."

Ike frowned. "Knife work is dirty."

"And shooting a man in the back of the neck is good clean fun!" Dave said hoarsely.

"I'm sorry, boy," Ike said. "I forget the kind of competition you got."

Dave walked across the room, kicked the wooden box gently, frowned down at it. "You say Hawson is maybe a little crazy?"

"He could be. Maybe is."

"You got Pete's clothes here?"

"That's right. Why?"

"Wait a minute. I'm doing some thinking." Dave frowned for a few minutes. "Is that roan fast?"

"One of the best."

Dave squatted on the floor close to Ike's bed and talked for ten minutes in a low tone. Ike looked at him incredulously for a long time, and then a slow grin crept across his face. "Dave boy, it just might. It just might. And there's not another damn thing you can do except wait with a rifle and try to bushwack him."

CHAPTER

2

Buzzard Bait

Dave Austin shouldered his way through the swinging doors into the Gay Gold, Saturday night. Two games of pocar robado were going on at the round

tables in the rear of the place. Fat Wesser, huge and red-faced, with eyes like chilled skim milk, stood behind the bar. Two men stood at the end of the bar and Dave realized immediately that they matched Ike's description of Hawson's men.

One was a kid too young to shave, with thin pale hands and dark eyes that were luminous and beautiful. They had the look of candles around a bier, of sunlight on silver coffin handles, of the raw metal of a filed sear. He had a quiet confidence far beyond his years. He stood with his back to the bar, his elbows hooked over it. Thin white fingers dangled above the grip of the .44 in the shallow holster against his right thigh. His name, at the moment, was Randy Adams.

The second one was much older, a squat sandy man in his early forties with thick shoulders, no neck, freckled hands and small sleepy eyes. His underlip was severed by a vertical scar which bisected his square chin. Dave guessed that he would be Quinn. Dave glanced quickly around the saloon and decided that of the seven Ike had carefully described, these were the only two in town. He had already stopped in at the Easy Do.

In a needlessly loud voice, Fat Wesser said, "Hello there, Dave Austin!"

Quinn lost his sleepy look and the luminous eyes of Adams turned sharply toward Dave, flicked down to the empty holster and registered disappointment.

Before Dave had a chance to order a drink, Quinn hitched up his belt, swaggered over to him and said, "What's your business in town, Austin?"

Dave heard the silence that filled the saloon. There was no slap of cards, rattle of chips, from the tables in the rear.

"Who the hell is he?" Dave said to Wesser.

Quinn grabbed Dave's shoulder, yanked him around. "I'm talking to you, friend. Jud Hawson likes to know everybody's business. What's yours?"

Dave felt the quick red tide of anger and was glad he had left the Colt behind. He kept all expression off his face and said, "You look like the sort of scum that would work for Hawson."

Quinn went so pale that the freckles on his thick face stood out. He said over his shoulder, "Loan this punk your gun."

"I never use them, friend."

Quinn sneered at him. "What do you keep in that empty holster—knitting?"

"Suppose you haul that ugly nose of yours to your end of the bar and keep it out of my business."

Quinn was amazingly fast. Dave was braced for the punch and had hoped to duck it entirely. He slipped most of the blow, but enough of the force of it caught him high on the cheekbone to drive him back several steps. He shook his head clear as Quinn charged in.

Quinn's sledge-hammer blow went around the back of Dave's neck. Dave pivoted and put all his lean strength into a short right hook into Quinn's middle. The diaphragm muscles that he hit were as hard as woven leather, but Quinn grunted and stepped back. Dave smashed Quinn's mouth with an overhand left and was in turn driven back, almost falling, by a thudding blow under the heart.

Blood ran down Quinn's chin. He shook his head and followed up his advantage. Dave was driven back by the grunting-fury of Quinn's heavy blows. A hard fist caught Dave high on the temple and, as he fell to one side, Quinn straightened him up with a blow to the jaw.

Dave was faced by two figures. Both of them were Quinn. They drifted apart and then together, refusing to merge into one opponent. Dave hit Quinn in the face with a feeble right and then went down as Quinn's fist hit him between the eyes.

He caught a flash of movement and turned his head sharply, putting his arm across his face. Quinn's heel dug deep into his arm with such force that he thought at first that the bone was shattered.

As the dimness faded away, Dave saw that Fat Wesser was holding a gun on Quinn, saying, "I won't have you killing him with your boots in here, Quinn."

"Get up, Austin!" Quinn roared.

Dave lifted his shoulders from the floor and gasped, "My legs! I can't move my legs!" He groaned and sank back to the floor.

There was a heavy buzz of conversation and Dave caught the words, "His back. . . Must have hurt his back when he fell. . . Maybe he's just yellow. . ."

"Get Ike Andres," Dave said, groaning again. . . .

Bart Case, who called himself a doctor, sat by the bed in Ike's back room and heated the end of a long needle in a match flame. He said, "Son, this sort of thing is a little over my head. I got to know if you got any feeling in them legs. Now I'm going to jab you in a couple of places with this here needle and if you feel anything, you holler."

Ike stood close to the head of the bed. The light flickered on his gray face, his twisted mouth. "Sure, Bart," Dave said.

Bart, with odd deftness, jabbed Dave four times. Right and left thigh. Right and left calf. Dave said, "Come on, Bart. Stick me with it. What are you waiting for?"

Bart sighed. "I already stuck you, son. You sure enough got dead legs on you. I don't know enough to tell you what the answer is. Maybe after a few days the feeling will come back slow. I hope so. Maybe never. Hard to tell."

Dave bit his lip and said, "I'll be okay." His voice was flat and dead.

Bart left. Ike said gently, "He'll go right on back to the Gay Gold and tell 'em." Ike walked over and slipped the bolt on the door, drew the thick curtains across the one window.

Dave swung his feet over the side of the bed, stood up and stretched. He felt his jaw. "That Quinn had rocks in his hands."

"I was afraid that needle business would give you away."

"Got tossed into a hill of red ants once. Felt just about like that. Did you see Louis?"

"Sure. As far as Louis is concerned, the roan fought his way out and ran off into the hills. I got him up in that little box canyon a half mile beyond Pete's place. The place that Pete used to own."

JUD HAWSON walked out onto his *placita*, yawned and stretched. In a few moments the Mexican woman would bring his breakfast out. He was a big man, thick shouldered and tall, with a brown face too young for his long white hair. His eyes were a cold clear blue and his profile was taken from a Roman coin.

During the past three years he had

trained himself to move slowly, speak slowly. He carried himself with enormous dignity. Each morning of his life he stood in his dooryard and looked at the distant blue of the mountains and thought of the day when his holdings would reach the edge of those mountains.

There was no limit, no ceiling, for a man with vision, with the guts to make that vision come true. The rest of them were stupid and lazy. They clung to their land and hoped for the best. He, Jud Hawson, would gobble up their little spreads and turn the range into bright yellow gold. The gold would buy more range, and what he couldn't buy, he'd take.

They were stupid to resist him. The sheriff had bucked him, so he had bought the sheriff. If he couldn't have been purchased, he would have died. Ryan at the store resisted him for a time. He bought Ryan. Men could be either purchased or beaten or killed. They had small hearts and small visions. They lived with their stupid noses in the dust.

Hawson lived with the great men of the past who came to him during his long dreams at night and spoke softly to him. "You grow bigger, Hawson. Some day it will be impossible to ride across your land in a week's time. After you have all the land, there are other things. You will have many men then. You must raise and equip an army. The rest of them are weak. Only you Hawson. Only you. Only you."

He stretched again and noticed that the golden sun of the dawn shone on a soft layer of mist that clung to the hollows, spread thinly across the flats. It was good land. The best.

He heard a faint shout, an unidentifiable sound that came from a great distance. He peered into the sun and saw a horse and rider. The horse cut through the mist in a slow lope, looking as if its hooves didn't touch the ground. He heard the distant thud of hooves.

He squinted into the sun, wondering who it was. Suddenly he was very still. The rider wore a yellow shirt that blazed in the sunlight. The big hat was dead white. There was something familiar about the way the man sat the horse. The horse itself. . . .

Hawson gasped. The rider was soon lost in the mist. * * *

Randy Adams stood with his hat in his hand in front of the table where his employer was having breakfast.

"Hell yes, he was dead!" Adams said flatly. "His horse tossed him into the rocks and I went over and took a good look. The bullet went in the back of his neck and busted his chin all to hell on the way out the front. Besides, he landed on his head in them rocks."

"You say Louis Besa got his horse? Go see if Besa still has it. Send Quinn up here to see me."

When Quinn arrived, Hawson snapped, "Take off your hat and stand straight!"

Quinn looked sullen, but he removed his hat and straightened his shoulders. Hawson questioned him in detail about the episode with Dave Austin. When he had all the information, Hawson gave Quinn his instructions.

Both men were back within three hours. Hawson saw them together in the main room of the ranch house.

Adams said, "I saw Besa. He told me the roan got away from him and run off onto the open range. I backed him up against the gate to his corral and smashed his nose with the barrel of my gun. He got down on his knees and begged and blubbered and said that he'd told me the truth. He was too damn scared to lie. Why did you send me to see him?"

"Shut up! And how did you come out, Quinn?"

"Andres didn't want to let me in but finally he agreed. I went in and told Austin I was sorry about his legs and he cursed me for about five minutes. I let him rave. He looked sick as hell. I got over by the bed; and when Andres went out into the front of the shop, I leaned down and grabbed Austin by the throat.

"I watched his legs. He fought like hell with his arms. Knocked this here tooth loose. But he didn't move his legs at all. Finally he thumped on the wall with his fist and Andres came in and I had to leave go of him. He ain't faking, Mr. Hawson. His face was black as your boots and still he didn't move those legs none."

Hawson stood up suddenly and paced

over to the big fireplace. He looked down at the gray ashes of the previous winter and said, "I might as well tell the two of you what this is all about. But don't tell any of the others. This morning I saw Pete Austin ride across my range. Just to the east of the house."

Quinn gasped. Adams said, "Must have been somebody looks like Pete looked."

"It was Austin's roan. I know the gait on that animal. He wore one of those special yellow shirts and that white hat with the extra-high crown. He sat his horse like Pete Austin."

Hawson's back was turned to the two of them. Adams looked at Quinn and smiled crookedly, touching his finger to his temple. Quinn shrugged.

"Sun was pretty bright this morning," Quinn said.

Hawson turned and glared at him. "Damn it, man! I know what I saw! I saw Pete Austin ride by out there and I want it stopped. You understand? Stopped!"

"Sure, sure," Adams said gently.

"Don't use that tone of voice on me, Adams!" Hawson yelled.

HAWSON sat at breakfast again with Quinn and Adams standing in front of his table. He lifted a forkful of food with a trembling hand. His face was gray under the tan, and there was a new deepness to the lines bracketing his mouth.

He said gently, "I want to thank you gentlemen for following my orders so explicitly. This morning Pete Austin rode by here again. I trust that both you gentlemen were enjoying your sleep at the time?"

Hawson, for the first time in nearly two years, was wearing a gun belt. Adams glanced at it and then looked at Quinn. There was quiet scorn in Adams' eyes.

Hawson continued in a louder voice, "When I give orders, I want them followed. Tomorrow morning you two will be out there on the flats before dawn. You'll both have rifles. You'll be on foot. You'll wait for Pete Austin and when he rides by you'll fire. Understand?"

Quinn looked down at the flagstones. He said sullenly, "Pete Austin is dead. I'll be damned if I'll lay on my belly out

there on the flats just because you start seeing things."

The table upset as Hawson came up out of his chair. He swung his long arm and his open palm cracked against Quinn's face. "You'll do as you're told!"

Quinn snarled and started to turn away. His hard palm slapped against the holster at his thigh and came up fast, levering the gun to bear on Hawson. The sound of the shot was flat and hard in the open air. Quinn took one step forward and fell onto his face. His gun slid, spinning, toward Hawson's feet.

Hawson's mouth worked. He turned toward Adams, who was shoving his gun back into the holster. "Thanks, Adams."

"Don't thank me. You handle the payroll. That ought to be worth two hundred. I sort of liked Quinn. Better make it two fifty."

A Mexican woman came to the door to the *placita*, took a look at Quinn, threw her apron up over her head and ran back into the house.

"The hands are out. She won't say anything," Hawson said quietly. "Get Quinn's stuff out of the bunkhouse. Bury it with him. Keep any money you find on him. Get Miguel to dig the grave. That'll be worth three hundred to me."

Adams grinned broadly. "I'll do all that, but I won't chase no ghosts for you, Hawson."

"You'll call me Mr. Hawson!"

"I won't chase ghosts, *Mister* Hawson."

In midafternoon Randy Adams rode out to the east of the ranch house. He swung down from his horse and walked until he came on the tracks. He squatted on his heels, rolled a smoke and looked at the tracks for a long time. There was a half-smile on his lips, but his eyes were puzzled. At last he went back and got Miguel. Miguel was very good at tracking. Just before dusk Miguel, panting with exertion, stood aside proudly while Adams rode into the little box canyon. The roan nickered. Adams grinned broadly and told Miguel to run along back to the ranch.

* * *

The door closed behind Bart Case. Dave sat up in bed and smiled ruefully at Ike Andres. "If that old fella don't

stop coming around with that needle of his, I'm going to hire out for a pin-cushion."

"Needles feel better than bullets, Dave. I don't like the way you're pushing this thing. You can't show up at the same time again. Damn it, old Hawson'll be waiting with a rifle even if he doesn't get any of his boys to work on you."

Dave frowned. "I spoil the effect if I don't show up at the right time, Ike." He laughed. "I think I got the old boy going. His face looked as white as Pete's hat this morning. Just one more morning ride and then we try the hole ace."

"I don't like it," Ike said sourly. "Go along with me this far. Don't try it in the morning. Catch him just at dusk and ride close enough so that he can catch a flash of the shirt. Then light on out of there."

Dave thought for long moments. "Okay. Maybe you're right. Maybe if he doesn't know what time to expect the ghost it'll rattle him worse. Did you bring back the thing from Louis' place?"

"It's out in the wagon bed. I'll get it."

Andres hobbled out and brought it in. Dave looked it over. Two pieces of strap iron bolted together in the form of a T. Bolt holes were drilled in the base of the T. It was about thirty inches high and the cross-piece was about twenty inches long.

Ike said, "I didn't bother to bring the saddle in. We braced the horn the way you said and drilled through it."

Dave fingered the sharp curve in the base of the T. "You figure this curves enough?"

"Seems to when you get it set up. If it don't we can wedge it between a couple of rocks and bend it just a little bit more."

"Tonight, Ike, after the town's abed, you better take the wagon and take all the stuff out to where the roan is. I'll go on out way before dawn as usual and I'll stay in the canyon all day and hit Hawson's place at dusk. You better roll up some blankets and stick them in this here bed and tell folks I'm sleeping."

Jud Hawson sat in his big chair in the dark and looked out the window across the sighing plains, looked at the speckled infinity of stars. He sighed heavily. He thought of the dawn rider and the palms of his hands grew clammy. He shivered.

Lately the great men of the past hadn't come to him in his dreams. He had dreamed of the face of Pete Austin. There was a smile on Austin's lips. He had whispered, "You, too, Hawson. You, too. You, too."

In his room Hawson lighted the lamp, took his favorite rifle from the gun cabinet. He spent over an hour cleaning and polishing it. At last he held it in his hands and snicked the bolt shut. It made a slick, heartening click.

He sat with the chill steel against his hands and thought of Pete Austin. He saw himself kneeling on the small terrace at dawn, the quick shots whipping the air, the butt thudding against his shoulder. He looked through the sights and fired shot after shot into the yellow shirt. He saw holes appear in the fabric. The rider laughed and kept riding.

Hawson looked toward the black square of his window and shuddered. He blew out the lamp and undressed in the dark. He stretched out, stiff and weary and stared up at the dark ceiling. The muscles of his neck and back ached. He thought of the way Quinn's gun had spun at his feet. He thought of Adams' eyes.

CHAPTER

Dead Man's Blood

3

Ike Andres saddled up the sway-backed gray with practised fingers, climbed with difficulty up into the seat and slapped the gray's rump with the reins, clucked to it softly. The wagon started with a jolt. The horse clumped down the narrow alley and he turned right on the main street. No light showed in all of Oracle. Andres guessed that it was about two o'clock. A pale moon rode near the horizon.

He swayed on the wagon seat and thought of Dave whom he had left sleeping. Dave was a good boy. A little hard and bitter for his age. Couldn't hardly blame the boy. A tough deal all the way around. A no-limit game with death for the low hole card.

The slow rumble of the wagon made him sleepy. He swayed from side to side, peering through the night, clucking to the gray once in a while. It was a sad thing not to be able to ride after so many years

in the saddle. He remembered the times he had rode the point on the big herds of longhorns, all the way from Texas to the Kansas yards.

It had been a fine life. He thought, as he had thought many times before, that the horse that had crippled him should have crushed his life out against the brutal hardness of the snubbing post. Then he wouldn't be condemned to live out his years as half a man.

He turned off the main road, braced himself as the wagon lurched down the steep side of a small washout, clung to the seat as the gray scrambled up the far side, the stones rolling under its hooves.

At last he came to the turnoff to the canyon. The last quarter mile was across the open prairie. The dry grasses rustled against the wheels. He reined in at the entrance to the canyon and sat for a time savoring the beauty of the night before climbing stiffly down. He had decided that a tangle of chokeberry bushes near the canyon entrance would be the best place to hide the things he had brought.

He tethered the gray, pulled down the tailgate and grabbed the T of scrap iron. He had it half out of the wagon when he heard the sound close behind him. He froze.

He heard a quiet sigh. "You made me wait a long time, Andres. Maybe you can tell me about the ghost."

Ike recognized the silky voice of Adams. He knew that Adams' eyes were as adjusted to the faint moonlight as his own. He stood motionless, still clutching the heavy T of scrap iron.

Suddenly, with a wild yell, he whirled, hurling the heavy device at the dim figure behind him. There was the sound of an impact, a hoarse exclamation, and the figure melted down against the ground.

Ike tried to move quickly, tried to force his broken body to carry him forward to where he could get his gnarled hands on the throat of Adams. He took two steps and the world exploded into fire, the heavens cracked open with a noise of thunder. He was on his back with something bubbling in his chest. The dry grass brushed his cheek. The stars swirled madly above. He couldn't take a deep breath. . . .

Dave jumped up quickly and hurried

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10 STORY WESTERN MAGAZINE

to the window. There was a hint of gray in the east. He had slept too long.

Ike should have been back long ago. He stepped quietly out the back door. The wagon wasn't back. Something had happened to Ike.

He dressed in haste, pulling on a dark shirt over the bright yellow one that he put on first. He had to make up time. The town would soon be stirring. He yanked his boots on, buckled on his belt and jammed the white hat on his head.

The door to the livery stable was unlatched. It creaked as he opened it. He stood still, heard the snores of the old man. The boards creaked as he walked back to the stalls. The old man snored on. He stepped into the stall, quieted the welcoming whinny with a hand over the tall black's muzzle.

He saddled up, led the horse out of the stall. He swung up, hinted with the hooks, and the black pounded across the boards. Dave ducked low as the black ran out the wide front door. Behind him he heard the yell of the old man. He lifted the black into a dead run.

He pulled in the black at the canyon and advanced cautiously. He was up to the wagon before he saw Ike's body.

He jumped up, his fingers tight on the gun grip, the muzzle swinging in slow horizontal arcs. Six feet beyond Ike the T of scrap iron bent the grass over. One end of the cross bar was stained dark. Near it was a dark spot in the grass.

At the crash of the shot, he dropped flat. The muzzle flash had come from a spot twenty feet away. He fired twice in the direction of the flash. The sky grew lighter. Flat on his belly, he wormed his way forward. At last he saw a dim shape in the grass. He aimed carefully, saw it jerk as the bullet hit.

Seconds later he rolled it over. Adams! He touched the flesh of the man's hand. It was like ice. Adams had been dead for some time. Adams had his gun in his right hand. Burning grass glowed near the muzzle. Dave suddenly understood. Some reflex had caused it. Some tremor in the dead, stiffening body.

Adams' chin was smashed and his throat was torn where the heavy strap iron had hit it. A trail of blood led back

THE CORPSE RIDES AT DAWN

through the grass. The picture was clear. Ike had hurled the iron at Adams, tearing his throat. Adams had killed Ike and then bled to death as he tried to crawl back to his horse, his gun on cock.

Dave glanced at the east. The rim of the sun would soon show. There was no point in waiting until dusk. The death of Ike spoiled the entire plan. Everything was ruined. By the time he could construct the dummy of the sacking that Ike had hauled in the wagon, it would be broad day. Back in the town they would go into the back room and find him gone. Word would reach Hawson before noon. They would no longer think of ghosts. They would have guns ready for him.

He stood up, holstered his gun and looked down for several minutes at the dead face of Adams. He snapped his fingers suddenly. His mouth twisting with disgust, he squatted, unbuttoned Adams' sodden shirt and ripped it off.

He got rope out of the wagon, laid the T of strap iron on Adams' chest and tied it there with knots that bit into the cold flesh. It took a long time to work Adams' limp arms into the sleeves of the yellow shirt. Dave got the roan, hobbled it and bound sacking over its eyes. It stood quivering.

He picked up Adams' body, hoisted it into the saddle. The roan smelled death and tried to shy away. The saddle horn had been reinforced and two holes bored through it which matched the holes in the base of the T. He fed the bolts he had taken tightly through the holes.

Adams sat upright in the saddle, his legs dangling limply. Dave tied his feet into the stirrups, tied his wrists loosely together in front of him and fed the reins into the limp hands. He stepped back.

SINCE the first gray of dawn, Jud Hawson had stood on the flagstones of the *placita*, looking toward the east. During the night he had been tempted to go down to the bunkhouse, wake up the other five in his rough string and station them out in the flats to the east of the house. But he remembered how Quinn had reacted. And Adams.

The sun crept up until the great golden ball was above the horizon. Overhead the



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10 STORY WESTERN MAGAZINE

gray changed slowly to morning blue. Hawson felt a deep relief. The time was past. Pete Austin would not come again.

Hawson slowly relaxed. He sat down heavily in the chair behind his small breakfast table. He put the rifle on the flagstones at his feet.

He heard the distant thud of hoof, jingle of rowel hook, and suddenly he was standing, trembling.

His eyes widened and his breath stopped as he saw that the roan was headed directly for the *placita*. It came shouldering out of the mist, and on it was a silent man in a white hat, a yellow shirt.

He lifted the rifle, centered it.

Hawson smiled tightly and squeezed down on the trigger. He cursed. A miss! He forced steadiness into his arms, fired again. The rider came on. The big white hat was pulled down low over his eyes, shadowing his face.

Hawson knew that he hadn't missed.

The roan was much closer. He saw the shattered chin, the blood on the shirt. The voice of Quinn sounded in his ears, . . . and busted his chin all to hell on the way out the front.

Hawson saw the dark holes appear in the yellow shirt. The roan was wide-eyed, foaming. Hawson knew that he was screaming, felt the muscles of his jaw crack as his mouth opened. He continued to yank on the trigger after the rifle was empty. He had no more breath for screaming. He threw the rifle full at the man fifteen feet away and, as the horse thundered up to him, he dropped onto his face, covering his head.

The horse veered off across the flats, the hooves thudding ever more softly until at last Hawson could hear nothing but the excited servants around him.

He wanted the darkness. He didn't want eyes with which he could see a man in a yellow shirt riding a horse—a man long dead. A man whose head bobbed grotesquely.

He jumped up so quickly that those standing around him moved back in confusion. He saw the flat swarthy face of Miguel. He said softly,

"Take your knife and take out my eyes, Miguel."

Miguel backed off, palms out in horror.

THE CORPSE RIDES AT DAWN

They looked at his face, heard his soft and wheedling voice, saw the clawing motions of his hands. They turned and fled.

When they were gone, Dave Austin slid off the black and came up the slope.

Hawson heard his step and turned. His face lighted up. In a voice like the voice of a child finding a delicious surprise, he said, "You have come to kill me!"

Dave stood for a moment and listened to the begging, the babbling. Dave holstered his gun and walked away.

It took him the best part of a half hour to ride slowly back to the canyon. By midmorning he had captured the badly spooked roan. Back at the mouth of the canyon he took the spade from the wagon, buried Adams, the T of iron and the doctored saddle. He replaced the turf and swept it clean of traces. He lifted Ike gently into the bed of the wagon, tied the black and the roan to the tailgate and drove slowly back into Oracle.

He felt oddly light-headed. Once, as the wagon jolted along, he licked dry lips, and said, "Ike, you understand, don't you? He'll be dead by nightfall."

But Dave found out later that he was wrong. Hawson didn't kill himself until a half hour before dawn the next day.

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10 STORY WESTERN MAGAZINE

(Continued from page 40)

swiftly, she brushed the stubble on Steve's cheek with her lips. Coloring at her own impulsiveness, she drew back and slit the envelope. Her eyes brightened.

"Dad! Look, it's my needles. They came, after all. My needles, dad! Now I can make that new dress!"

"I reckon a woman has got to have needles," Darniel said slowly. "She ain't civilized unless she's got needles. And a new dress might spunk you up some, Rose. But you don't think I'm going to let you go nine miles through this snow to a dance at Farrell's alone, do you?"

The girl smiled suddenly.

"I'm not going alone, Dad," she said. "Mr. St. John's going with me. And you don't think Mr. St. John is going to worry about a little old, nine-mile strip of snow after coming over the pass, do you?" She turned on Steve. "You wouldn't mind waiting with us for a week, would you, Mr. St. John?"

Steve thought dutifully about Lola Mantel and Denver City and how he had risked his life for a packet of needles. He could maybe talk to a girl like Lola right off the bat, brash because she was brash. But it would take him a good week to find out what Rose Darniel would think of living the winter through in a place like the little post at La Porte. It would take a good week to get around to kissing her when her paw wasn't looking.

"I'd admire having time to get you around to some of my neighbors," Darniel said. "This was a tolerable piece of trail work you've done and right neighborly. I figure you ought to get a good slice of the trade out of the park next season."

"Thanks, Darniel," Steve said. "Thanks, plenty." He turned to the girl. "I'd admire taking you to that Thanksgiving dance, Miss," he said. "I'd—I'd—" He stopped, coloring.

The girl colored, also, but mischief was in her eyes. She turned to her father.

"Supper's just on, Dad. You eat in the kitchen. I'm bringing Mr. St. John's plate in here to him."

"Heap it up, Rose," Darniel said. "I reckon he's hungry."

The girl's eyes danced more brightly as the curtain fell closed behind her.

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